

BEADLE'S HALF DIME Library

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Vol. I.

Single
Number.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 13.



The Dumb Spy.

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AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE BOY RIFLEMAN,"

CHAPTER I.

THE CLAIM-STAKERS.

THERE were thirteen of them—all men in the prime of life, strong, robust and hardy-looking fellows, with rough, bearded and sunburnt faces, and eyes that shone with an honest light and the spirit of adventure. All but two were dressed in suits of brown jeans, which was, in a great measure, indicative of their nativity. The two exceptions were habited in the rude buck-skin garments so common to the hunter and trapper of the North-west.

Those in the homespun were a party of Kentuckians who had come from their southern homes, to select "claims" in the new territory, preparatory to "entering" them when the Indians' title to the land expired. Those in buck-skin were a couple of hunters in the employ of the claim-stakers, as guides and scouts.

It was a summer night in the year 1842. A camp-fire was burning in a dense forest bordering a large creek, in the south-west part of the then territory of Iowa, and within its light the little band of claim-

stakers reclined in attitudes of ease and repose, chatting, smoking and listening to their guides' "spin yarns" of their adventures upon the border.

A number of fine-looking rifles reclined against the tanks of surrounding trees, while at one side lay a flag-pole, surmounted by a compass and chain.

They were encamped upon a tract of land known as the Black-Hawk Reserve, belonging to the Sacs and Fox Indians. But in less than one year from that time, the title of the latter would expire, and the reserve be thrown open to the white man's occupancy.

Captain John Rossgrove, the leader of the claim-stakers, had, long before, conceived the idea of planting a colony in the new territory of Iowa, and having selected from his list of acquaintances such men as he knew would stand by him in times of danger and adversity, they struck out for the country of the upper Des Moines. The Black-Hawk Reserve attracted their attention, and having readily perceived its great natural advantages, they at once selected it as the land of their future home, and proceeded to locate and stake off claims, ready for pre-emption as soon as the Indians' title was remitted in May of the following year.

They had been in the territory several days when we introduced them to the reader; and although their proceedings were in violation of the Government treaty with the celebrated chief, Black Hawk, they had obtained from the latter a private permit to select lands on certain conditions, which they endeavored to observe very strictly. But, despite all this care and precaution, they little dreamed of the dangers gathering around them.

Captain Rossgrove, the leader of the party, was about twenty-five years of age. He was a man of fine accomplishments, brave and handsome. A few days prior to his departure from home, he had wedded one of the fairest daughters of the land, and it was with a joyous heart he received the fond parting kiss of his young bride, and struck out to find them a home in the great West. And thoughts of his wife—of her waiting and watching for his return—proved a keen spur to all acts and movements.

Nat Taylor, or Noisy Nat, as he was usually called on account of his inborn jocularity, was the eldest of the two hunters, being about five-and-forty years of age.

Wild Dick, as the other guide was called, was not over thirty years of age, and in form was small, but strong and wiry. He had attained the sobriquet of Wild Dick from the wild, startled expression always in his large blue eyes, and a nervous quickness in his movements not unlike that common to wild animals. Born and bred on the frontier, he had been schooled amid its wildest scenes and dangers; hence, he had imbibed much of the characteristic wildness of the woods and prairies.

As the hours wore away, the campfire became neglected in the all-absorbing stories of the two hunters, and at last the party found themselves in almost total darkness. However, it was replenished, and as its light reached out further and further into the gloom, it revealed to the eyes of the party an object hitherto unobserved.

"By snakes, it's a hornet's nest!" exclaimed Noisy Nat.

"So it is," replied Harry Dudley, the surveyor; "hadn't it better be removed? Its inhabitants might disturb our repose."

"No, Mr. Surveyor," replied Nat, "if we'll let the hornets alone, they'll not pester us. I have a natural love for the little critters. Why, boys, you wouldn't believe me if I war to tell ye that such an insignificant thing as a nest o' hornets saved my skub from a pack o' red-skins, onc't."

"Humph! that's nothin'," ejaculated Wild Dick; "I saved a dozen or more lives onc't jist by crookin' my fingers a few times, and so I'll tell ye 'bout it. You see I had a brother—a twin-brother too, and we looked so much alike that I could hardly tell which was t'other. Eyes, hair, forms and feat'ers war jist alike—"

"See here, Dick," interrupted Old Nat, "if you war so much alike, how do you know which one you are?"

"I'll tell you how. My brother Seth was deaf and dumb, but he war'n't no fool, I can tell you. He larnt the mutes' alphabet—that is, he larnt to talk with his fingers. I larnt too, and so we could talk with our fingers jist as fast as you and me can with our tongues, and that's sayin' a good deal. We war both livin' away up north, in a little shanty, and war engaged in huntin' and trappin'; for I'd have you know Seth war a tip-top hunter. One day I left Seth and went out into the woods to look arter a b'ar-trap, and what should I do but run into the clutches of about a hundred Ingins, on the war-path. They threatened to kill me, and scalp and play thunder in general unless I'd guide them, by the nearest known route, to a certain fort which they wanted to destroy. You see they belonged a long ways to the south and war'n't acquainted with the country. A thought struck me. I told 'em I'd show 'em the way if they'd let me go to my cabin first. They refused, so I concluded to die rather than betray my friends at the fort. When the reds seed I war in earnest 'bout dyin', they concluded to let me go to the cabin, but they war to go along, and threatened me with instant death if I spoke to any one at the cabin. I promised 'em I wouldn't, and fur fear of an accident, and to help cover my intentions, I had 'em put a piece of blanket over my mouth, and then off we marched to the cabin. Brother Seth met us at the door. The Ingins paid no attention to him when they seed he couldn't speak, for they supposed he war demented, and you all know how a red-skin regards a crazy person. My escort didn't understand finger-talk, so while I was busy 'bout the cabin, and gettin' my gun and knife and sich things,

I kep' up an animated conversation with brother, and never once did the reds suspect what war up. I told him the pickle I war in, and what I had promised to do to save my life. So as soon as I had set off with the Ingins for the fort, Seth leant out, too. He took a roundabout way and beat my Ingins thar more'n two hours. Wal, to make a long story short, when them reds attacked the garrison, they got gloriously licked, and not one of the soljers got a scratch. And that's how I saved the fort and several men by crookin' my fingers a few times."

"That's pretty good, Dick," said Captain Rossgrove; "but where is your brother Seth now?"

"God only knows. I haven't seen him these five years, captain. The last I heard of him he war 'mong the Hudson Bay Fur men. He war a great pet of the'n, and the best trapper in the hull caboodle. I sw'ar, boys—" and a tear moistened the eye of the hunter—"I'd give a good deal to see that boy. I think I've been a leetle keardless 'bout him. He couldn't git through the world like the rest of us, and I promised my o'ld dying mother I'd keep a watch on witless Seth, as he war always called, tho' he war'n't witless by a long shot, I can tell ye. Poor Seth! Jist as soon as I git through with you fellers I'm goin' to see 'bout him, if Scarlet Death don't put a pink spot on my temple."

"Then you fear that reputed Demon?" said Captain Rossgrove.

"Why shouldn't we all fear him? He deals death to both white and red."

"Then you really believe that there is such a creature as Scarlet Death, the Demon of the Des Moines?"

"Believe it? Why, Cap, I know it! Hav'n't I see'd lots of his victims, and his hoof-prints on the earth?"

"That's so Cap," added Noisy Nat; "I've witnessed the same myself."

"But never seen the Demon itself?"

"No, nor no one else. He's invisible. But there's no gettin' round thar being such a critter, for he makes a good many burys for the folks over on the 'Dispute,' and the Ingins."

"Well," said Rossgrove, "if this country is infested with devils, it will not be a healthy place for a colony."

"Wal, thar's one Demon sure, and he's tuff on the population," said Wild Dick. "We'll be apt to see his hoof-prints before long, mebbe."

"Then he is cloven-footed, eh?"

"Yes, makes a track like an ox; but thar's only two tracks, else I'd think an ox, or suthin' of the kind, made the tracks. Ugh! It makes the chills creep over me."

"And why is the monster called Scarlet Death?"

"Because a small, round scarlet spot on the temple, jist afore the ear, is the only mark he leaves upon a victim. He never breaks the skin or draws blood, but seems to strike with the deadly swiftness of the lightning's flash. What he strikes with, no one knows, but I do know—"

Further speech was here interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. The next instant a stranger made his appearance within the radius of light from the gloom of the woods. He was a tall, villainous-looking fellow, with black, snaky eyes, a low, sullen brow, and rough, sensual face. He was dressed in the garb of an Indian, and the unceremonious manner in which he stalked into camp, convinced our friends that he was there with no friendly intentions.

"Good-evening, stranger," said Captain Rossgrove, in his free, cordial manner, rising to his feet, and advancing to meet the man.

"Well, good-evenin'," returned the latter; "but then, you needn't stare a feller out of countenance. I'm sure I'm not sich an object of curiosity."

"Hope you'll excuse our want of manners," said Rossgrove, in a tone slightly tainted with sarcasm, "but whom have I the honor of addressing?"

"M. Jules Devreaux. I am business-agent of the Sacs and Fox Indians, and hold my appointment from the United States Government."

"Indeed! Glad to meet you, M. Jules Devreaux." "Perhaps, when you learn my business here, you will have reason to change your mind."

"I hope your business is not of an unpleasant character. However, we are prepared to listen to whatever you may have to say," said Rossgrove.

"Well, sir," began the arrogant Frenchman, "I presume you are aware of your being trespassers on the Black-Hawk Reserve?"

"I know no such thing," replied Rossgrove; "we are here by permit."

"By permit of whom?"

"One that has authority," replied the captain, "and we are taking no liberties that will conflict with the conditions of that permit."

"But they will with the treaty of your Government. This land belongs to the Sacs and Fox Indians, and for days have you been chaining it, and setting up landmarks, without the permission of the rightful owners."

"The Indians have expressed no desire for us to leave, and we are only selecting sites for homes which we propose to build up when the Indians' title to these lands expires."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Devreaux, sarcastically; "you're a progressive set, to take time thus by the forelock, at the risk of losing your scalps. It's quite a year yet until the Indians' title to these lands expires, and when it does, we propose to renew our claim. Therefore, begone at once!"

"Your insolence, sir," said Rossgrove, growing somewhat indignant at the man's insulting language, "is equal to your want of good sense, and—"

"That expresses it, Cap," chimed in Noisy Nat.

"If you wish to transact any business with us," continued Rossgrove, "you will do so in language becoming a man, or leave our camp at once."

A low, defiant laugh escaped the villain's lips.

"Impudent, sir, you are," he said to Rossgrove; "your hair may ornament an Indian's lodge before morning, if your courage is equal to your display of impudence. Jist think of it, gentlemen—if you are worthy of being called gentlemen—jist think of it; one blast on that"—producing a small silver whistle—"would bring a hundred Indians down upon you in a minute."

"The nation, you say!" exclaimed Noisy Nat; "then, jist for the Lord's sake, give us a blast, and let 'em come, lickey-t-scoot. I'm decomposin' fur a fight with the red-skins. Gorry Alm'ty, I could lick fifty o' 'em myself; and Wild Dick here could polish the rest, to say nothin' 'bout the captain and his men. Yas, whistle 'em in, Mr. Devilrow, or gimme the tool, ye pizen sap-head, I'll blow it till she bu'sts."

"Never mind, Rattle-tongue, you may be glad to swallow your words before daylight," said M. Jules; then, turning to Rossgrove, he continued: "Now, sir, I desire to know whether you intend to leave this reserve, or not?"

"Yes, whenever we get ready," was Rossgrove's reply.

"That's the talk, Cap," added Wild Dick, and his words were repeated by every man.

"That is your decision, then?" said Devreaux.

"It is."

"Then your blood be upon your own heads," said the villain, lifting the whistle to his lips. But the blast that was intended to call a hundred savages down upon the little band of whites was never given, for at this instant a low cry escaped Devreaux's lips, and he sunk a quivering mass to the ground, stricken down by an unseen hand!

A cry of surprise burst from the claim-stakers' lips. They were completely dumbfounded, and stood as though rooted to the spot, and gazed with distended eyes upon the prostrate form of the man. Not one of their party had raised a hand against him, and yet he had been stricken down.

From whence had come the sudden, mysterious blow?

Noisy Nat advanced and bent over the prostrate form.

"Ay, boys," he exclaimed, in a husky tone, "I see now what done the work. Look thar!"

He turned the body over, exposing the left side of the face to the light. Just before the ear all eyes saw a deep, scarlet dent in the temple. The skin was not broken, nor was a drop of blood visible. But M. Jules Devreaux was stone-dead!

"By St. Peter!" exclaimed Wild Dick, "I understand it now. Scarlet Death, the Demon, has spotted the villain!"

"Yes, boys," added old Nat, "Scarlet Death is erbout, and God only knows which o' us will git a spot next."

The claim-stakers shuddered. The hunter's stories of this unknown destroyer had been confirmed by startling, horrifying proof; and in less than ten minutes more they had broken camp and were moving through the forest, down the creek, in search of more congenial quarters.

CHAPTER II.

THE "DISPUTE."

A FEW miles south of the scene of the events just narrated was a strip of country included in and forming a part of the territory of Iowa, which the State of Missouri claimed as being embraced within the boundaries defined by her constitution, and over which that State, for a long time, endeavored to exercise jurisdiction, while the territory, to which it rightfully belonged, disputed their authority. From these conflicts, this strip of country became known as the "Dispute."

Owing to its natural advantages and remoteness from seats of justice, the Dispute had become one of the most central posts for outlaws, river pirates and robbers west of the Mississippi. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century a number of French voyageurs had erected a trading-post at the confluence of the Des Moines river. This attracted others to the place, and the population gradually increased, though it was a class of men, and their descendants, who had in turn been under the jurisdiction and government of various war-chiefs of the savages, of Louis XV. of France, Charles III. of Spain, Napoleon I. of France, the Territorial Government of Louisiana, Orleans, Missouri and Wisconsin, and, at times, subjects of two governments at once, and the consequence was, they were the least governed of any people on earth, and carried on their robbery and river piracy with impunity several years after the date of our story.

It is true there were a few honest "squatters" on the Dispute, but, being in the minority, they were compelled to live up to the "Club Laws," a series of enactments of the "Disputers" for the government of their settlement.

It was with deep regret that these robbers and outlaws looked forward to the day when the title of the Indians to the land north of them would expire. The savages had been very sociable neighbors, after lending a strong hand in their work of plunder and pillage. Then it had become so handy for the outlaws to attach all blame to the Indians, that it seemed totally impossible to carry on their work after the Indians had left; for white settlers, they knew would flock in upon the reserve, and environ the Dispute, so that retreat to other quarters would be the only expedient. However, the Disputers, as they were called, had one present and fearful enemy to contend with. This was Scarlet Death, the Demon of the Des Moines.

On the afternoon of the same day on which our story opens, a number of the Dispute outlaws were congregated in a log-building in a little village called Spain.

They were a rough, villainous-looking set of men, of various nationalities, though the American and Indian half-breeds formed a good portion of the party.

"Men," said one of the party, who seemed to be a leading spirit, "the subject before us is one of no little magnitude. In less than one year from now the Indians' title to the land north of us ends. Then what will be the result? Settlers will flock in and crowd around us until it will not be safe for our business. But, we must not let them. We must stick to the Dispute, despite the vengeance of Scarlet Death or that thing called justice. The Demon we may manage to slay."

"Yes, if he don't kill us," spoke in a comrade. "You see, Lieutenant Thoms, Scarlet Death has warped it to a dozen of our men a'ready."

"I know it, Fuller, I know it," replied Cale Thoms, the second in command of the outlaws; "but, if we'll use proper caution, we may destroy the Demon, be he man or devil. The settlers we can keep away."

"Then we must begin in time," said a low-browed German.

"That's it, Dalberg," said Thoms; "if we don't let them get a foothold, we can control things awhile longer at least. If we intend to do this—keep the settlers off—we've work on hand this minute."

"The furies you say! What do you mean, lieutenant?"

"Just what I say. To be more explicit, there are about a dozen men a short ways north of here locating claims, and have been for three days."

"Fire and furies! what right have they on the Black-Hawk lands a'ready?"

"None; but they're locating claims to be entered just as soon as the Indians' title expires, and I tell you, boys, it must be prevented."

"That's the talk, lieutenant, but how'll we go 'bout it?"

"Well, in the first place, we could induce the Indians to make complaint to the Government officers, who would send dragoons to drive the claim-locators off, as they did Homlin and his crew, about a year ago. Then, again, we might stir up the Indians and get them after the trespassers, and, if they refuse, we can take them in hand ourselves, and work it so as to throw the blame all onto the red-skins."

"Boys," suddenly exclaimed a villainous-looking Spanish creole, "do any of you know who the leader of them claim-locators is?"

"No, no," was the general response.

"Well, I do."

"How do you know it?"

"Caramba! I know it by the evidence of my own eyes—it is Captain John Rossgrove, of Columbus, Kentucky."

A cry of surprise burst from every lip, for John Rossgrove was well known to them, having visited the Dispute once, with a company of dragoons, in search of a band of horse-thieves that he had tracked that direction. The Disputers were the real horse-thieves, but they put on such an innocent face during Captain Rossgrove's stay, that he was completely outwitted and put upon the wrong trail.

"Then, by Jehosephat," said Thoms, "our captain, Reckless Ralph, will accomplish his mission, perhaps, without much trouble. As it's about time the captain was back, I wonder if we couldn't scare Rossgrove home? I believe I will send a note to him in the care of the Mute Spy, and try it. But, see here. Wouldn't it be best to send a man to the Indian village to stir up the red-skins, also, for fear the letter may fail in taking them away?"

The opinions of all in this matter coincided with that of Thoms.

"Then," said the latter, "I'll appoint Jules Devreaux for the work, and my instructions, Jules, are these. Don't be too sticking about telling the Indians an abundance of good, healthy lies, as I know you can. Stir up their blood to a scalding heat, and get them out after the claim-locators, if possible."

"I'll do that, lieutenant, bet your life on it," replied Devreaux, who at once departed on his mission.

A few minutes later, a man on horseback dashed up to the door of the cabin—dismounted and entered the apartment where the outlaws were congregated.

"Bill Hohn, as I live!" burst from the lips of several.

"You bet, boys," roared Hohn, excitedly.

"Why, Bill!" exclaimed Thoms, "what the devil's up? Where's Reckless Ralph—Squire Ralph, or Judge Ralph Ratt of the Dispute?"

"He and t'other boys 'll be in to-night."

"Is it possible?"

"It is, and he's got what he went after. But to his surprise he found another man had a claim on it, but took it anyhow. And what do you think? We come nigh runnin' right into that first owner's hands this mornin' up on the Purchase. To make a long story short, that owner is Captain John Rossgrove, the very chap that came here once with a company o' dragoons. For fear of bein' discovered, Cap is goin' to lay hid till night, and he sent me on in advance with this note for you, Lieutenant Thoms."

Thoms took the note and read it.

"Boys," he said, when he had concluded it, "the captain wants us to run those claim-stakers out of the country at once. He is afraid they'll get wind of what he has got in his possession."

"Scarlet when does he wish for us to strike ze blow?"

"Soon as possible after nightfall. He says the locators have been chaffing off claims along Chequest Creek to-day, and will probably camp in the vicinity of the old Indian ford to-night."

"By gar, it be one grand fun drivin' ze locators off," exclaimed a little villainous Frenchman.

"Yes, but we'll have to be careful," said Thoms,

"for fear the claim-locators get wind of our movements. We will all go to our respective homes when we adjourn, then soon after dark, gather one by one on the north side of Beaver Lake. From that point we will shape our course, as I propose to send the Mute at once to the claim-stakers' camp, to ascertain their real force, and their means and advantages of defense. Therefore I proclaim this meeting adjourned until dark."

The meeting broke up.

CHAPTER III.

WITNESS SETH.

SHORTLY after the claim-locators broke camp the moon came up, and as they proceeded along the sandy shore of Chequest Creek toward the Des Moines, a cry from the lips of Noisy Nat brought them all to a stand.

"What now, Nat?" asked Captain Rossgrove.

"Look thar."

He pointed down at the sandy beach that lay sparkling before them in the bright moonlight. Every eye was at once bent in the direction indicated, and saw a long, slender hoof-mark deeply imprinted in the white, yielding sand.

"The Demon's tracks, by the holy mysteries!" exclaimed Wild Dick.

"And that is the track of Scarlet Death?" said Captain Rossgrove.

"Yes, Cap, that's the critter's track. You see he's been goin' up the Chequest. Ugh! his very tracks make me shiver."

"This Demon is a creature I'd like to see," said young Dudley, the surveyor.

"Eh! and git a pink on yer temple!" asked Noisy Nat.

"No, I have no desire to meet the fate of M. Jules Devreaux. But, what kind of a weapon do you suppose he uses to strike with?"

"The devil only knows; however, I think he strikes with his breath like the blow-snake, and that, too, as hard as chain-lightnin'. But, boys, let's hoof it on down to the river and then go into camp again, Demon or no Demon."

Acting upon this suggestion, the party moved on and soon came to the Des Moines. Turning, they proceeded a short way down its course, when they again came to a halt for the night. Selecting a favorable spot a few rods back from the river, they went into camp. A fire was lighted in the center of a dense clump of small trees, where the foliage above and around would prevent the light from shooting athwart the darkness and publishing abroad their new location.

It now became necessary to station a guard over the camp, and the responsibility of this duty first fell upon Wild Dick, who at once took his post in the woods a few rods west of camp.

The claim-locators now threw themselves on their blankets before the fire, and engaged in conversation. A few minutes had thus passed when a figure glided suddenly into their midst with the silence of a shadow.

Every eye sought the face of the silent intruder, and every man would have sworn it was the face and form of Wild Dick, but for the peculiar garb he wore. And even this, they believed was a trick concocted by the hunter while alone upon guard; and so Captain Rossgrove said:

"Why, Dick, have you deserted your post? Where did you get your new suit?"

The intruder made no reply, further than to touch his ear and lips. But, this was sufficient. It told them he was deaf and dumb! This brought vividly to their minds the story that Wild Dick had told them that night of his brother, Witness Seth; and, although they had never seen the latter, they were satisfied that he stood before them, for the family resemblance was remarkably striking.

The mute stood before them, gazing from one to the other, as though he were searching each face for a familiar countenance; but, seeing all were strangers, he raised his hand and began moving his fingers in a peculiar manner. He was trying to communicate with the party, but none of them being acquainted with the mutes' language, Captain Rossgrove signified the fact to him by a shake of the head.

"Call in Wild Dick," Rossgrove then said, to Noisy Nat, "for I am satisfied, from the great resemblance, that this man is his mute brother, Seth."

Noisy Nat at once relieved Wild Dick, who soon made his appearance in camp; and no sooner did his eyes meet those of the mute stranger than they lit up with a light of recognition, and the next moment the brothers greeted each other in an embrace that told of their great joy and brotherly love.

"Lordy, boys!" Wild Dick at length exclaimed, "this, captain and friends, is brother Seth, the identical twin-brother of whom I told you to-night. He's deaf and dumb, but he's no fool, I tell you."

Each of the claim-locators advanced and shook the hand of the mute, who acknowledged their greeting with a low bow.

The brothers then entered into a conversation which was carried on altogether with their fingers. It lasted for fully an hour. They were comparing notes since they last parted, years before. The claim-stakers were spectators, not auditors, of the silent conversation. At times they would see a smile of joy pass over Dick's face, then his brow would grow moody and his eyes would flash with a vindictive fire; then again his features would relax into an expression of surprise and astonishment. Suddenly his pent-up emotions found expression in the startled exclamation:

"Good God, is it possible—who'd 'a' thought—"

The words were uttered involuntarily, and having checked himself before he had fully expressed his emotions, he glanced quickly at Captain Rossgrove,

then continued his conversation with his brother. At length, however, he turned to the captain and said:

"I swar, Cap, I've learnt a heap to-night. Brother Seth has told me some swissin' big secrets. A part of them, howsumever, I'm not at liberty to tell, just yet, and part of them I am. One of them is this: we're in imminent danger. Before mornin' we're to be attacked by a party of—"

"Dragoons?" interrupted Rossgrove.

"No; a band of robbers, rascals and cutthroats. Seth says the settlers on the strip of country south of us, called the Dispute, is nothing but a nest of robbers, river-pirates, and counterfeilers."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Rossgrove. "A short time ago when I was through this country, with a company of soldiers, in search of a band of horse-thieves, we stopped at the Dispute, and for a frontier settlement, I considered it remarkably orderly."

"Ay, Cap, that was only an external show. Seth says they're a hard set, and it's them that's sworn to kill every man of us afore mornin'. They're goin' to attack us just as soon as Seth goes back."

"Then your brother is one of them, eh?" said young Dudley.

"Wal, now, Harry, you've come to the stickin'-point. Seth lives at the Dispute, and is here as a spy on our movements, but he will prove to you that he is our friend."

"Well, really, this is surprising news, and will be likely to prove a detriment to our calculations. However, if Seth's story is true—and there is not a doubt but it is—the Dispute may be the rendezvous of the horse-thieves, river-pirates, and counterfeilers, that have so long baffled the most strenuous efforts of the officers of justice. If so, we might maneuver around and get hold of the ringleaders, for whom there is a handsome reward offered."

"That's the right chorus, Cap," exclaimed old Nat. "I wouldn't mind turnin' an honest flip by raisin' the hair o' a boss-thief."

"What does your brother propose doing, Dick?" questioned Rossgrove.

"Stay right here, and let me go back in his place. Won't I tell 'em some big 'uns, tho'?"

"They'll mistrust your intentions, and probably shoot you," said one of the party.

"Not much, Hayworth; I propose to pass myself off as Seth, the Mute."

"A capital idea, Dick," said the captain. "Were your mother living, I am sure she could not tell which was which, so far as forms and features are concerned; but that tongue of yours would betray you."

"Nary time, Cap; I'd carry a good-sized pebble in my mouth to keep my tongue still, don't you see?"

"But you'd have other obstacles to meet. Your ignorance of the place and people would betray you."

"Not much, Molly Ann. I'd have Seth post me afore I left. The reason I'm so anxious to git among 'em is this yer; Seth says thar's sunthin' up 'mong the crew that he can't understand. It's sunthin' that's creatin' great excitement 'mong the villains, but they never give him a hint of what it is. You see he can't hear, and thar's only three in the clique that can talk the mutes' language, and one of these is the captain of the crew, and another one his darter. And now, boys, I'm goin' to find out what the great move is 'mong them robbers and pirates."

"Well," said Rossgrove, "I admit I am anxious to know myself, but I do not want you, Dick, to place your life in jeopardy."

The brothers now entered into another conversation, which lasted full an hour; then they retired a short distance from camp and exchanged clothing, and Wild Dick became Witness Seth, the dumb spy. The claim-locators felt certain his disguise would not be penetrated, unless it was through some inadvertence so peculiar to his reckless nature. In a few moments he took his departure for the Dispute, Witness Seth remaining with our friends.

The claim-stakers again threw themselves upon the ground in various positions of ease and repose. All became silent and thoughtful, and at length the gentle influence of slumber began to steal over them. Their conversation gradually ceased; their minds became heavy and drowsy, and at length, all but the mute were wrapt in slumber.

Several minutes had passed thus, when Captain Rossgrove was aroused by a light touch on his arm.

Rising to a sitting posture, he saw the mute bending over him, holding a small bit of paper in his hand, which he at once placed in his.

Rossgrove unfolded the paper and saw it was written over in a good hand-writing. He held it to the light and read:

"John Rossgrove, your presence is required at home, less your affections in your young wife will be supplanted by the eminent Judge—"

"A FRIEND."

The paper dropped from the captain's hand. The color receded from his face, and he gasped hard for breath. Had a dagger been thrust to his heart, he could not have manifested more violent emotions.

"It's a lie!" he at length fairly hissed between his hard-set teeth; "it's an infamous lie. Oh, if this man could speak—could tell me from whence this letter came! But, then, all the powers on earth could not make me believe my wife, my darling Camilla, is false to me. No, no; this note is an imposition—perhaps a trick of some friend who is in the neighborhood, and knows that I am here. It must be so, for no truer heart ever throbbed in woman's breast than Camilla's."

Thus musing, he picked up the paper and put it in his pocket. Then he lay down again. But he could not sleep. Something like a horrible dream had en-

crossed his mind, with something terrible to come. What it was, of course he could not tell. He tried to shake off the spell, but in vain—it grew upon him. At length he arose to his feet, and drawing his blanket around him, walked out toward the river. He wanted to be moving—doing something that would drive that fearful fantasy from his mind.

On the bank of the river, under some drooping foliage, he stopped. The moonlit stream lay gleaming before him like a bed of molten silver, while along either shore hung a black, somber fringe of shadows.

A solitary cricket was piping in an old log, hard by, and a bull-frog croaked on the margin of the stream.

From a breast-pocket Captain Ross-grove drew a small picture-frame, or case, which he opened and held where the moonbeams would show him the fair face set therein—the face of his young wife, Camilla.

"False, false!" he mused; "God in heaven forbid! Camilla, my darling wife, I know it is a falsehood, and why should I let the letter trouble me? One would think I suspected you, my angel Camilla. But never! Oh, if I could only look upon your living face this moment! Perhaps, if so, I would see those dark-brown eyes closed in slumber—dreaming—dreaming of—of your own John Ross-grove, while smiles play about those fair, sweet lips, which, perchance, may whisper my name. But ah! these are pleasant, but hopeless thoughts. Hundreds of miles separate us to-night, Camilla, and may for many more, but then—"

He did not conclude the sentence, for, just then, the silence that fell around him seemed to paralyze both body and mind. The cricket in the log and the frog on the margin of the river became hushed as if by magic. A silence reigned so intense that it seemed as though the spot had never been called from chaos; but this silence was broken. A faint sound rushed suddenly athwart the night. It was the dip of oars. A boat was descending the river. It would pass before the captain. He bends his head and listens. The low murmur of voices comes to his ears, mingled with the splash, splash of oars. He can hear the waves chafing the shore. He can see them circling outward in advance of the descending boat, and at length he sees the craft glide within the partially-obscured range of vision. It is a long bateau, and contains several men.

Ross-grove drew nearer the edge of the water—still keeping within the dense shadows—that he might be enabled to see who the voyagers were.

The boat comes on, its sharp prow cleaving the silvery waters.

He can count six men in the craft. Five are engaged at as many pair of oars, while the sixth one is supporting a burden on his arms and breast.

As the boat comes still nearer, the captain recognizes the man with the burden. It is Ralph Raft, the leading citizen of the Dispute, but Ross-grove little dreams that he is Reckless Ralph, the notorious outlaw chief.

Something drew the captain's attention to the burden Raft held in his arms. He saw it was a human form—the form of a woman. He could see her head resting on his breast, while her white, white face, upon which the moonbeams fell, was upturned to his dark, bearded visage.

"Ah," thought Ross-grove, "she is his wife or sweetheart. How fondly she gazes up into his face, and how tenderly he supports her! All is heaven to them now."

A strange fancy holds the captain's eyes upon the woman's face. The boat draws nearer. It is opposite him. He starts and clutches at a limb for support. A groan escapes his lips—a groan that seems to come from a bleeding heart. But the sound is drowned in the splash of oars, and the long bateau glides on. Then he staggers, and falls heavily to the earth.

He had recognized the face of that woman pillowed on the outlaw's breast. It was the face of his own wife—his own Camilla Ross-grove!

CHAPTER IV.

A GIANT'S HAND.

The shock that Captain Ross-grove had received well-nigh drove him mad.

Staggering to his feet, he gazed like one bewildered, up and down the river. But nowhere was the bateau with his young wife to be seen. What he had seen, however, was sufficient evidence of the truthfulness of the note given him by the mute: Camilla was false!

"False! false!" he almost shrieked, in agony of heart. "Oh, impossible! There must be some fearful mystery, or wrong, about Camilla's appearance here in the arms of that man. I must solve the whole thing before I leave this country, for I can not believe she is false. In company with my friends, I could easily overtake the bateau and release her. But this will not do. If she is guilty—unfaithful, I will find it out without her knowledge or my purposes. No, no; I will wait and work secretly. I will say nothing of what I have seen to a living soul, but will try, by some pretext or other, to hold my friends in the country until I know, beyond a doubt, the cause of Camilla's presence here in this wild land."

He became silent and thoughtful. Now and then a deep sigh escaped his lips. Finally he decided to follow on down the river, in hopes of gaining some clue to the mystery enshrouding his young wife's conduct.

He turned and moved rapidly down the stream, keeping within the dense shadows of the shore. Far ahead he could see the bright glimmer of the water in the moonlight, but nowhere upon its bosom could he see the object of pursuit. Still he followed on, scarcely aware of his vain efforts. A little moonlit

glade suddenly appeared before him. On its margin he came to a sudden halt, just within the border of some dense shrubbery. He had caught sight of a man standing on the opposite side of the opening, his head bent in the attitude of intense listening. A single glance told Ross-grove that he was an Indian warrior; and he at once realized a sense of danger when he saw that the savage was in war-paint. All the Indians he had seen heretofore had been habited in toggy that betokened friendship. This sudden change was evidence of hostilities, and the captain felt satisfied that himself and companions were the objects of their vengeance, which had probably been engendered by the death of M. Jules Devreux in their camp, and by their intrusion upon the Black Hawk Purchase.

The captain's first thought was of returning to camp and warning his friends; but before he had turned his eyes from the glade, his attention was arrested by seeing a white man enter the glade and move toward the savage. From the movements of each, it was quite evident they were there to meet by appointment.

Ross-grove bent his head and listened. He heard the conspirators enter into a conversation, but he was too far away to catch the drift of their conference. They talked on several minutes, the gestures of the white man indicating great excitement; then the Indian turned and glided away into the woods.

The white man still remained in the glade, and from the attitude which he assumed, it was evident he intended to await the Indian's return.

Ross-grove kept his eyes upon the man, and scarcely ten minutes had elapsed when he suddenly saw him stagger to one side, as if under a violent blow, and then as a low wail rung tremulously out on the still summer air, he sunk to the earth, where he lay beating the ground with his arms in apparent death-throes.

The captain was startled by this sudden and tragical scene. His mind reverted to the silent and mysterious death of M. Jules Devreux, and he felt satisfied the silent slayer, Scarlet Death, had dealt this second blow. But the apparent agony of the prostrate man caused every noble and Christian impulse of Ross-grove's heart to supersede all fears of personal danger; and, regardless of the consequences, he plunged from the thicket into the moonlit glade, and hastily approached the fallen man.

The struggling of the latter had ceased ere the captain gained his side. But upon his temple the death-mark of Scarlet Death was plainly visible! He was not dead, and Ross-grove at once resolved to tender him all the assistance in his power. He bent over the man and spoke to him. There was no response. The next instant, however, there was a sudden "whirr" in the air behind the captain; then he felt something encircle his form and pinion his arms at his side. He was then jerked violently to the earth. Then he felt himself dragged along the ground into the shadows of the thicket. When permitted to stop, he heard the soft tramp of feet around him. He saw the dusky outlines of human forms above him. He was a prisoner—insured in the coils of a lasso! But he could not tell whether he was in the power of Indians or robbers of his own color.

But whichever it was, one of them proceeded to bind his hands. This accomplished, a heavy, musty blanket was thrown over his head and shoulders and confined with a thong; then a gruff voice—the voice of an Indian speaking bad English—bade him rise to his feet.

Seeing resistance was useless, the captain complied with the order, then with the lasso which still encircled his form, he was conducted away through the forest. The soft echoes of many moccasined feet gave him an adequate idea of the number of his captors.

For a long time—for what seemed weary hours to the captive—they traveled on through the dark, tangled undergrowth and intricate mazes of the great wood, until they finally came to a temporary halt.

The captain was securely bound to a tree, yet it was some time before the blanket was removed from his head. When it was, however, the broad, vivid glare of a light almost blinded him, but as his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the dazzling glow, a wonderful spectacle was presented to his view.

The glow of a dozen camp-fires lit up the little oblong glade in which they were halted, and the light reflected by the green foliage on every side, gave the place a wild, weird appearance—the appearance of the interior of some old, deserted hall of bygone ages. Here and there a tall, slender cottonwood stood out alone in the glade, rising heavenward like a huge gray pillar as if to support the purple dome of darkness above, while all around the foliage of the towering trees, rendered a mystical white in the glare of the light, appeared like a tall, massive wall of scarp and fluted rock.

And to and fro across this great mysterious hall stalked Titan figures robed in blankets wrought in strange devices, while tall plumes waved and nodded about their heads, and great battle-axes flashed in their hands. Ross-grove knew these forms were those of Indians—all of whom wore the ensign of chiefs, with the exception of the guard that stood at his side.

As the moments wore away, other chiefs came from the woods and joined those in that grim old forest hall. Something of an unusual character seemed to be drawing the red-men there, but what it was Ross-grove could not form the faintest conception by their movements and talk, but judging by their malignant scowls that at times were bestowed upon him, he had reason to believe he was the object of their convening there. And if so, his fate would soon be decided.

At length an aged chief, to whom all the others seemed to pay homage, rode from the forest into

the glade with the bearing of a king. Dismounting, the great chief gave the reins of his animal into the hands of his attendant; then turning, strode with a slow, stately step to one of the camp-fires, where he at once seated himself upon the ground. There was nothing of that evil in the face of this chief that was so plainly portrayed in the dusky sensual faces of his comrades. On the contrary, it wore a mild, intellectual expression, seldom seen in the Indian's countenance; although something of serious import seemed to be weighing on his mind until the effects were traceable in his dark eyes and wrinkled brow.

This man was the celebrated Black Hawk, the friend of the white man. He had met his subordinates there to hold council over the violation of his treaty with the Great Father at Washington, by the little band of claim-locators.

The council was at once opened by Black Hawk, who exerted all his eloquence against that of his chiefs, who favored an appeal to the war-path to enforce their rights to the Reserve, and who were in favor of hanging the claim-locators' scalps at their girdles as a warning to all other white trespassers. The old chief was obstinate in his desire for peace, but how far his wishes were observed will be seen in the hostile demonstrations of his rebellious war-chiefs, as our story progresses.

Ross-grove could not understand a word that was said by the councilors. He saw, however, that the attention of the chiefs was diverted from himself, and so he began speculating on his chances of escape. He soon discovered, however, that no effort of his own could undo his bonds. Even if he did accomplish his own release, the guard at his side stood ready to strike him down.

This guard was a fierce-looking fellow, and stood with his eyes fixed upon the captive as though they were riveted there, but at length the voice of Black Hawk was heard gathering strength as he addressed his war-chiefs in all the eloquence of which he was master, and this drew the attention of the guard toward the circle of councilors. He stood, his whole soul seeming absorbed by the eloquence of the chief.

Even the captain could not help gazing in admiration on the stately form of the speaker, for, although his words to him were meaningless, his very attitude and gestures were eloquence itself.

While thus engaged, something brushed the captain's cheek and a shadow fell across his vision. Something came between his eyes and the head of the savage guard.

He started when he saw a huge hand and great, hairy, muscular arm appear from the opposite side of the great oak to which he was bound. The members seemed of such wonderful size that he believed they were the hand and arm of some unnatural monster.

The great bony fingers were open and were moving slowly toward the Indian's neck, as if to grasp it; then a quick movement and—the giant's fingers are fastened upon the savage's throat.

The red-man gasps for breath and struggles for liberty. He can not cry out, and the voice of the chief drowns what slight noise he makes.

Still the captain can see no form to which that hand and arm belong; and now he shrinks away with horror, for he sees the eyeballs of the savage start from their sockets and the tongue protrude from the open jaws as the great, bony fingers of the unknown destroyer close upon his throat in that death-grasp.

CHAPTER V. OLD HURRICANE.

It was a moment of extreme anxiety, uncertainty and horror to Captain Ross-grove. The silence with which the huge hand had throttled the savage, and the mighty power with which it was possessed, seemed miraculous. He knew not but that the second hand of this monster was being reserved for his own throat. But in this his fears were soon set at rest, when the colossal form of a man made its appearance from the opposite side of the tree.

A single glance told the captain he was a friend, though a stranger. He was a man not over three and thirty years of age, and standing nearly seven feet in his moccasins. He was dressed in a neat-fitting suit of buck-skin, made as if to display the wonderful development of the wearer's form. His shoulders were broad and massive as those of an ox, and his breast deep and swelling. His arms were long, muscular and sinewy, and his hands large, brown and hardened to knots of steel. A large and well-shaped head, displaying a preponderance of both the animality and intellectual, was set upon a stout, swelling neck, and from beneath the wolf-skin cap that surmounted it, a wreath of dark-brown hair hung down his back.

His face was a little angular and covered with a beard that hung to his breast. His nose was of the Roman type, which was evidence of itself of the fearless, daring and unconquerable spirit of the man.

Withal, he was a noble specimen of manhood, a perfect knight of the forest—a man to be admired as well as feared. Nor was he a character of the author's imagination. He was a true, living hero of the woods, whose name is familiar to many yet living.

As he appeared before the captain, the fingers of his right hand fastened upon the savage's throat, he reached forward with the left, in which he held a knife, and severed the captain's thongs. Then he sheathed the knife, and with both hands he lifted the savage aloft as though he had been a child, and hurled him to the earth with a force that would have crushed the life from a common being.

"Now, stranger," said the giant, turning to Ross-grove, "let us count tracks like lightning for safer quarters."

The giant took the lead, and followed by Ross-grove, crossed the glade and plunged into the purple gloom of the woods. From the crotch of a tree, the hunter snatched a long rifle as he hurried on still further into the depths of the forest.

Ross-grove followed close upon the heels of his rescuer. Not a word was spoken by either, nor did they slacken their footsteps until they had put a safe distance between them and the Indians. Then they came to a halt in a little moonlit opening. The giant borderman now turned and gazed down upon the captive.

"I say, stranger," he said in a tone not unlike the gentle roar of a lion, "the red devils had you haltered up like a lamb for the sacrifice."

"Yes," replied Ross-grove, pleased with the man's voice and words; "I was in a close and painful situation, and would have stood no show of escape but for your timely assistance. And now, who am I indebted to for my rescue?"

"No one, stranger, no one; if 't hadn't been fur the shadder of that tree to which you war bound, and the clash and bang of ole Black Hawk's tongue, I couldn't a' done nuthin'. So you see, your escape is owin' to fate. I did, howsumever, squiz the red's jugular, but that's nothin' when a feller gits used to it. Why, I've been in active service as a hunter, trapper and ha't lifter, fur nigh onto twenty years. I've scoured the kentry from the north pole to Mexico—ay, I've put a girdle of very likely tracks across the great West many a time, stranger; and never, in all my journey, hev I found my match under an Inghn scalp. There is one in these diggin's, howsumever, that has promised his sweetheart my scalp as a present, and not until she gits it is she to marry him. His name is Big-Foot, and, stranger, if that squaw never becomes Missus Big-Foot till she gits my scalp from her lover's hand, she's doomed for an ole maid. Howsumever, eny Inghn is welcome to the scalp of Ole Hurricane, that can git it."

"Hurricane?" repeated Ross-grove; "then Hurricane is your name?"

"It's not edactly the name my mother gave me, but then, as 'em Yallerstone fellers seen fit to call me Ole Hurricane, I guess it'll soot. What's your handle, stranger?"

"John Ross-grove."

"Just so! Wal, how comes it you're in these parts, John, and what war you doin' in the Inghns' hands?"

Ross-grove informed him of the object that had brought him to the country, and of the dangers with which they were threatened by the Indians and robbers, as well as of the manner of his capture.

"Then you've friends about, have you?" asked Hurricane.

"I have a dozen friends up the river."

"Up the river? What do you mean, John?"

"My friends are encamped on the Des Moines river, near the mouth of Chequest Creek."

"You're surely out of your latitude, John," replied the jovial, blunt-spoken hunter. "Why, you're ten miles West o' the river."

"Is it possible that I have been so deceived in the course taken by my captors?"

"It are, sure as gully. But see here, John, you war sayin' the Inghns and robbers war de-tarmined to run you fellers off the Resare, and you say you won't run—that you'll raise a muss fust. Now, that's what I call true, royal grit, and if yer conscience is clear, why, stick to yer resolutions and fight to the bitter end. But if yer conscience ain't clear, leave at once; for I tell ye that's nothin' like a clear conscience and a full stomach in successful Inghn-fightin'. And now, John, Ole Hurricane is a born lover of fun, and that's nothin' afloat I like so well as to chaw up a red-skin now and then; and say, friend John, wouldn't you like an addition to your party in the shape o' Ole Hurricane?"

"I would, most assuredly," replied Ross-grove.

"I'm yer laddy then, John, and so we might as well lean out for camp, or them red vulgarians 'll be on our track. Besides, we've a long tramp ahead o' us, and mebbey we'll have some scalps to sort over afore we git through."

"Then lead the way, Hurricane. Strike the river a mile below the mouth of Chequest Creek if you understand the country well enough."

"Certainly; I know it well as a map-maker," replied the hunter, throwing his rifle to his shoulder, and moving on through the woods.

As they journeyed on in silence, Ross-grove now and then obtained a fair view of his giant guide as they crossed a little patch of moonlight, or a glade, and he saw that his head was erect like that of a buck, while his eyes roamed restlessly on the darkness around them; and he was not a little startled when the hunter came to a sudden halt, and turning to him, said:

"I don't know whether you know it or not, John, but I know that that's been somethin', either human or beast, and possibly both, doggin' our footsteps fur the last two miles."

"I thought I heard a footstep once myself," said Ross-grove, "but as the sound was not repeated, I accorded it all to mere fancy."

"Wal, we'll probably find out sumthin' more about it fore long. We've a strip o' peairy to cross afore we ritch the De Mine timber proper, and mebbey its moonlight will tell the tale."

They moved on and soon came to the narrow strip of prairie, or rather, a smooth, barren ridge dividing the two bodies of timber, and as there was no way to reach the woods on the opposite side otherwise than by crossing this opening, they at once began the journey, which was attended with great haste and extreme silence.

They soon gained the foot of the ridge on the opposite side, and just within the shadows of the undergrowth they came to a temporary halt.

In gazing back over their trail, they were not a

little surprised to see three Indians and a dog on the summit of the ridge, boldly outlined against the clear, starry sky.

One of the Indians seemed like a giant by the side of his companions, and must have been a man of Old Hurricane's proportions.

The dog was moving along before them with his nose to the ground, and it was readily perceived that he was guiding the savages upon the trail of the two white men.

"By the gods o' Olympus, John!" suddenly exclaimed Hurricane, "they're trailin' us! Oh, ho! I see into it now! That big lummx you see in the middle, is that infernal Fox Inghn, known as Big-Foot. He's gittin' impatient 'bout marryin' his greasy-skinned sweetheart, and 's detarmined, I presume, to rake in my ha't at once, so the weddin' can go on. He's my ekal in size, and I expect we'll make a snortin' ole fight when we come together, John. But then, I'll not trouble him to-night, though I'll tell ye what I will do: I'll shoot that dog that's sniffin out our trail, and that'll throw the red scalp-ers on their own resources."

As he concluded, he raised his long rifle and leveled it upon the dog, which was about thirty rods away, and still plainly outlined against the sky. He aimed against the sky, then depressing the muzzle of the rifle until the dark object covered the sights, he pressed the trigger. There was a vivid flash, and the clear report of the piece rung out on the still night-air. As the echoes died away through the wooded aisles, the sharp death-howl of the dog came to the ears of our two friends, mingled with yells of savage rage and vengeance.

"Whoop, yoop, hurrah, ye cowardly varlets up thar on the hill!" shouted Ole Hurricane, at the top of his iron lungs. "Show yer greasy carcasses a minute longer if ye want a kiss from the lips of Old Surity! Ho, ho, John, I'll bet they're frothin', but let them froth. Ole Hurricane arn't afraid of the hull Inghn nation. But I'll fodder ole Surity—droppin' the butt of his heavy rifle to the ground—" and then he'll leave ahead for the river."

While reloading the piece, Ross-grove asked: "Hurricane, have you heard of Scarlet Death, the Demon of the Des Moines?"

"Oh, yas, I've heard of such a critter."

There was something in this off-hand, evasive reply that startled the captain. It forced upon his mind a conviction that grew upon him from that moment; and the more he tried to cast it off, the deeper his mind became engrossed with the belief—the conviction, that Old Hurricane was *Scarlet Death himself*! But, satisfied he had nothing to fear of him, he followed him on through the forest.

Two hours' brisk walking brought them to the river near the very point where the captain had been captured.

"We are not far from camp now, Hurricane," said Ross-grove, as they halted on the banks of the stream.

"Reckon not," replied Hurricane, "as we're not fur from the mouth of Chequest Creek. Did you leave your friends asleep?"

"Yes; as I could not sleep, I stole away from camp without disturbing them."

"Then, if they're still asleep, we'll first crawl into camp, lay down, and say nothin' to enny one till mornin'."

"They may have discovered my absence through the man left on guard, if he saw me leave camp," said the captain.

"Ten to one your absence is not known. They're all green hands, John, in border tactics, and I want to give 'em the fust lesson."

"All right, Hurricane," replied the captain.

They now bent their footsteps up the stream, and the dull, sickly glow of a camp-fire soon burst upon their view. It was the same fire around which Ross-grove had left his friends asleep.

Carefully the two moved forward, and finally halted within a dozen paces of the camp.

"Yes, they are all there, fast asleep," said the captain.

Old Hurricane now counted ten forms wrapped from head to foot in their large, gray blankets, and lying in a circle around, and with their feet to the fire.

"You're sure them's your friends, are you, John?" asked the hunter.

"Why, yes, certainly," replied Ross-grove, a little surprised by the question; "there lie ten of them, and the eleventh one is on guard. You see, they've rolled themselves up in their blankets to keep the musketoes from troubling their sleep. Just in the background, there, you can see our surveyor's compass, chain and flag-pole. We are all right, so let's make a charge into camp, and see how sound they are sleeping."

"No, let 'em sleep, John. It'll be sich a jolly surprise to 'em when they wake up in the mornin' and see my huge carcass layin' among 'em. And I know it'll be a lesson to 'em, too. It'll teach 'em never to sleep so sound in these diggin's ag'in, but what they can hear the softest footstep in camp. But, afore we lay down, John, we'd better put the fire out, fur fear Big-Foot and his varlets might blunder here-aways."

"Very well, Hurricane."

The two moved forward, and quietly entered the camp. The men moved not in their sleep. The captain and his friend seated themselves on opposite sides of the waning camp-fire, facing each other.

Only a few red, glaring coals lit up the surrounding gloom, and as the captain gazed into the dying heap, bitter thoughts arose in his mind. These led to what had occurred before he had left camp, and he ran his eyes over the sleepers to see if the form of Wild Dick was among them. But they were all so completely enveloped in their great blankets that

he could not tell one from the other. There were ten forms, however, and if Dick was still absent, and his mute brother also gone, then there was no one on guard. But if Noisy Nat was still on guard, then, either Dick or his mute brother was among the sleepers.

The captain was painfully anxious for the return of Dick from the Dispute, and over the cause of that anxiety he sunk into a mental stupor, from which he was finally aroused by a touch on the shoulder. Raising his eyes, he saw Old Hurricane bending over him with a wild, startled expression upon his brown, bearded face.

An exclamation of surprise arose to the lips of the captain, but it was promptly suppressed by a significant movement of the hunter, who, bending still lower, whispered in Ross-grove's ear:

"God Almighty, John, we've committed an awful blunder!"

"What is it?—what is it, Hurricane?"

The hunter pointed at the sleeping forms around them, and replied:

"They're all Inghns, John, instead of your friends, and I'll wager my soul that that lopin' curse, Big-Foot, is under yonder blanket. Yes, we're entraped—ah, there! Up and fight to the death, John!"

The shrill chirp of the cricket broke the awful silence of the moment. Ten pairs of naked savage arms beat the air as one, as the ten gray blankets of the claim-locators were thrown aside. Then, from the earth, ten savage warriors arose with a scream that thrilled through the midnight air, and rung its quivering echoes along the valley of the Des Moines.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWO GIANTS' CONFLICT.

THE situation of Captain Ross-grove and Old Hurricane was one of the most imminent and deadly peril. Surrounded as they were, by ten infuriated savages—one of whom was the giant Big-Foot—with no avenue of escape open to them, there was no alternative but to fight to the death. And no sooner was the savages' yell given than the two whites were upon foot, and, as they threw themselves into an attitude of defense, a defiant shout pealed in thunderous notes from Old Hurricane's lips.

The savages were armed with tomahawks, and, with these uplifted, they swept toward the whites, counting upon an easy and certain victory. But they were destined to meet with an obstacle little dreamed of in their mad thirst for Old Hurricane's scalp. A dozen concealed rifles suddenly poured their leaden missiles into the ranks of the over-confident wretches, and several of their number fell dead. Then forth from the dark shadows of the surrounding forest rushed Captain Ross-grove's friends with a prolonged and startling shout, that paralyzed the limbs of the savages and struck terror to their hearts. But they soon rallied strength and courage, and the next instant the shouts of the claim-stakers, the yells of the savages, the roar of Old Hurricane's lion voice, and the clash and ring of steel, made the moment a terrible, fearful one. To and fro the combatants swayed and surged; some were up and some were down—all fighting as only brave men and desperate enemies can fight.

But, from the beginning the odds were against the savages, and, from the first, the tide of battle went against them, and at length they were compelled to yield to the superior strength of the claim-stakers, and, in three minutes from the commencement of the fray, those of the red-skins who had not been slain were routed and driven away into the forest.

Shout after shout pealed from the lips of the victors when they found themselves masters of the field. But their victory was not a bloodless one. Two of the claim-stakers had been slain and others slightly wounded. Among the latter was the mute, Witless Seth, who stood by our friends in the thickest of the fight.

"Boys," said Captain Ross-grove, as they rallied around the camp-fire, "how in the name of mystery came those savages in our camp, wrapped in your blankets?"

"I will tell you, captain," said Harry Dudley; "Nat, there, who you remember was put on guard, came and roused us all from our sleep, and informed us that he had seen you leave camp in a sort of mental abstraction, and that more than an hour had elapsed since your departure. He expressed fears of you having wandered away and got lost, or having been foully dealt with by lurking foes; so we all left our blankets and things in camp, and hurried away in search of you. The Indians must have seen our movements, and, at the same time, have been apprised of your coming, and, the devil whispering to them, suggested the idea of filling our places under the blankets with an equal number from their own ranks. But, thank God, our return was just in time to save you and the big stranger that was with you—"

"Old Hurricane, the hunter! Where is he? Where is he?" suddenly exclaimed Ross-grove, who, amid the excitement of the moment, had permitted the absence of his new friend to escape his notice.

"The last I see'd o' him, and the first, also," said Noisy Nat, "he had grappled hand-to-hand with a savage fully as big as himself—the notorious Big-Foot."

"Hark!" suddenly exclaimed Ross-grove, "I hear a crashing in the undergrowth yonder. It must be Old Hurricane and the savage still engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter. Hark!"

All listened. All heard the thrashing of some heavy bodies among the undergrowth south of the camp. They could hear heavy, dull, sodden blows, quick, labored breathing, gasps and groans—unmistakable evidence of two deadly foes engaged in a silent death-struggle.

"Yes, yes; it is the hunter, boys!" exclaimed the captain. "Come, let us assist him, for a bigger and braver heart than his never throbbed!"

They all rushed to the scene of the conflict, and bent their gaze into the darkness. They could just see the outlines of the two giants clutched in each other's embrace, but the darkness and rapidity with which they changed positions prevented them from rendering the old hunter the least assistance, lest, by mistake, they might aid the savage. With wildly-beating and anxious hearts, and throbbing brains, they stood motionless, gazing with dilated eyes into the gloom upon the shifting forms of the foes.

The latter were down upon the ground, but they finally struggled to their feet, and, locked in each other's grasp, they went whirling away through the undergrowth like autumn leaves. But they soon went down again with a crash. Then they went bounding away, and finally rolled into the little glade within the broad glare of the camp-fire.

Our friends saw they were locked in each other's great muscular arms; they saw their faces were covered with blood, that their teeth were set, and that their eyes glowed like those of two struggling tigers.

Across the glade they went rolling and bounding, in such rapid evolutions, that their bodies seemed incorporated into one.

Noisy Nat attempted to assist the old borderman, but a flying foot struck him in the stomach, and doubled him up on the earth fully a rod away. Others attempted to render the hunter some assistance, but their attempts were as fruitless as Nat's, even if less painful.

Like two great beasts the combatants went whirling across the opening, and were soon lost in the undergrowth on the opposite side. Neither one uttered a word nor a cry. They fought in silence. An old and bitter grudge was being settled. Neither possessed a weapon save those nature gave them. There were, however, knives in their girdles, but one movement toward drawing them might give the other an irretrievable advantage. Main strength, and the power of endurance would have to settle the contest, unless the claim-stakers made some interference in behalf of their friend, the hunter.

Fast almost as the claim-stakers could follow up, the foes whirled away through the undergrowth and darkness toward the river!

"Boys!" exclaimed Rossgrove, "they will roll into the river! We must prevent it if possible, if we would do ought to save the life of our friend."

Several of the party hastily placed themselves between the combatants and the river, and made every effort possible to prevent the threatened danger of the borderman, but their efforts were as fruitless and feeble as a child's would have been. The giants tore away from their grasp and whirled on, over the bank into the river with a thunderous splash.

Each of them had a new danger to face and contend with, for the water at this point was deep. The claim-stakers entertained hopes of the waves parting them. But this was not the case. They fought on more desperate, more deadly than before, as if the waves had strung anew their sinews, and added strength to their frames and vengeance to their hearts.

At times they were in plain sight on the surface of the moonlit waters, then again they were lost from view beneath the tossing waves that were gradually bearing them down the stream.

"Fernal furies, cap'n!" cried Old Nat, "this is what I call tough as 'ell. I s'wore I've a notion to try and shoot the Injun."

"No, no; don't do it, Nat," replied Rossgrove. "Old Hurricane would be as liable to be shot as the savage. Grin and bear it, Nat."

"Them fellers beats ole Satan hisself on a fight. A feller might as well interfere with two elephants a-fightin' as them. Oh, but I got an appetizin' old sockdolager in the stomach from one of their feet. Whew, how the water flies!"

The claim-stakers could do little else than stand and watch the conflict, which still raged with unabated fury. Now and then the foes were completely enveloped in a cloud of flying water and spray, while around them their feet beat and churned the waves to a foam.

But at length it was noticed that their strength was failing. Their demonstrations were growing less desperate, and their blows fell slow and feeble. They were under the water a good portion of the time, and this—not each other—was what was winning the battle, as strangling gasps and sobs plainly indicated.

Slower and softer fell their blows, feebler and fainter grew the sounds of their struggle, and finally their struggling ceased altogether. Then, as they again sunk from view, one of the combatants' hands was raised aloft, as if for a blow, the fingers clutching a flashing knife.

"There!" exclaimed Noisy Nat, "did ye see that flash? One o' them has drawn a knife, and the fight'll soon be over with."

"May Heaven protect our friend!" said Captain Rossgrove.

The foes sunk from view beneath the waves. A minute passed, and neither arose to the surface. Another minute dragged by, and still the waves held them down. It was a spell of agony and torturing suspense. The claim-stakers expected each instant to see one or the other rise to the surface with the scalp of his foe in hand. But they were disappointed in this; the water became calm and tranquil, and flowed on as quietly as though its bosom had never been disturbed, nor stained with human blood.

CHAPTER VII.

MORE DANGERS AND ADVENTURES.

"The waves have conquered both of them, boys,"

said Rossgrove, sorrowfully, "and we have lost a valuable friend."

"No; one of them lives, captain!" suddenly exclaimed Ethan Hamilton. "Look yonder, toward the opposite shore!"

He pointed across the river, and every eye followed in the direction thus indicated, and saw a dark, spherical object upon the glimmering surface of the water, moving slowly and silently toward the opposite shore.

It required but a second glance to tell what it was—a human head. Without a doubt it was the head of one of the giant combatants. But which one? The distance was too great to determine the question by the eye, and now another silence of painful uncertainty and nervous suspense was imposed upon the party.

But it lasted only for a moment. The moving object reached the bank. Then it rose upward from the water, followed by a pair of bronzed, massive shoulders and a large, dusky body.

The figure leaped ashore. It was the figure of the giant savage, Big-Foot!

"My God, it is the savage!" cried Captain Rossgrove. "Where is our friend?—where is Old Hurricane?"

As if in answer to his question, the giant savage on the opposite side of the stream stopped on the white, sandy beach, within the full glow of the moon, and brandishing a human scalp above his head, uttered a wild, fearful, and triumphant war-whoop; then turned and plunged into the impenetrable shadows of the forest beyond!

"That, boys," said Captain Rossgrove, as the triumphant Big-Foot turned and bounded away into the forest, "determines the fate of Old Hurricane. He has been slain, and but an hour ago I would have wagered any thing there was no one man living that could have taken the life of that hunter in a fair fight."

"And a month ago, Cap," replied Noisy Nat, "I'd 'a' sworn that were no one on the footstool that could ekal that devil-catcher, Big-Foot, and I'm o' the same opinion still. But who is that man Hurricane o' your'n, Cap?"

"He's a stranger to me; I never met him until to-night," replied the captain. "He rescued me from the Indians, and during our journey here, told me he was called Old Hurricane, though of course that is not his true name."

"Wal, I never see'd him afore, but I've heard o' a big hunter 'bout his caliber, up the Moingonia, but his name war Wallace."

"I think Hurricane could hardly have been the same man. He appeared to be well acquainted with these parts, and from what I saw of him, it is my candid opinion he was Scarlet Death!"

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of the party.

"Then if that is the case, the Demon of the Des Moines is a being of the past," said Harry Dudley.

"Well, I am sorry he has been slain, for we have lost a valuable friend in these perilous times, when friends are so much needed," said Captain Rossgrove; "for he had promised to stand by us through thick and thin."

"And so I will, John," said a deep bass yet pleasant voice behind them, accompanied by a massive step and movement in the undergrowth.

The claim-stakers turned, and to their joy and surprise, saw Old Hurricane appear from the shadows of the shrubbery, with his scalp unharmed.

"Is it possible?—really?" exclaimed the captain. "Do not my eyes deceive me? Is it not a ghost—the ghost of my friend, Hurricane?"

"Reckon not, John," replied the old hunter, breaking off into a low, silent laugh.

"Give me your hand, old fellow," returned Rossgrove; "we had given you up as dead when we saw Big-Foot swim ashore, brandish a scalp in the air and flee into the woods with a yell of triumph."

Again the old hunter burst into a roar of laughter, and then as he combed the water from his beard with his fingers, he said:

"That war a fatal mistake that big fool made, John—the same I'd 'a' made, perhaps, had enny of you come to my assistance."

"I do not understand you, friend Hurricane."

"Wal, I'll explain. When we war fightin' in the river, an Injin—a friend of Big-Foot's—war standin' under the bank below here a ways. I just got a glimpse of the varlet as we two sunk under the water. When we rose to the top ag'in, the Injin war gone, and the next minute I felt sumthin' fingerin' about my feet. I knew what it war to one't. That Injin had dived under the water and swum to his friend Big-Foot's assistance. But—ho! ho! ho! as we sunk the last time, we all three got mixed up so we couldn't tell which from t'other, but Big-Foot, somehow or other, got a hold of his friend's hair and scalped him instead of me. 'Bout this time a separation took place, and I went one way and Big-Foot the t'other—both swimmin' under water. And I'll swear, boys, I like to bu'st with good, sound laughter when I see'd that big red lummix bounce ashore, flop his friend's scalp above his head, blow off his balzoo, and go waltzin' away into the woods. But it's not over with yet. We'll meet ag'in some day, and then, John, somebody's hair must come."

The old hunter's story set things aright once more, and with a feeling of great relief, the party hastened back to the camp. Replenishing the fire with fresh fuel, a broad light soon relieved the spot from the surrounding darkness. Attention was now given to the wounded, who had forgotten their pains during the excitement of the two giants' conflict. Their wounds being but slight, were soon dressed, then the two dead comrades were wrapped in their blankets and placed aside for burial on the morrow.

The death of these two friends proved a sad blow,

and wrung the hearts of the little band with heart-felt sorrow.

A number of dead savages lay within the radius of the camp-fire. These the claim-stakers proceeded to remove into the shadows of the surrounding thicket, and while they were thus engaged, a cry suddenly burst from the lips of one of the party.

"What now, Wharley?" asked Rossgrove.

"The Demon's mark—the Scarlet Death mark!" and he pointed to a deep, scarlet dent on the temple of one of the dead warriors. No other marks were upon him. The Demon's stroke had slain him.

"Remove the body," said Rossgrove, in a manner that implied a desire of silence on the subject, as he glanced involuntarily toward Old Hurricane.

Not another word was said about the mysterious slayer, for all felt satisfied the giant hunter was the Demon.

The return of Wild Dick was now anxiously awaited by Captain Rossgrove. His desire to hear from the outlaws' stronghold was growing upon him. And, too, Witless Seth, the mute, seemed uneasy or anxious about something or other, for he stood apart by himself, and ever and anon started up with a wild expression on his face.

Finally when the camp had been cleared of all the slain warriors, Captain Rossgrove called the attention of his men and addressed a few words to them in regard to the dangers that menaced them.

"But, boys," he said, in his concluding remarks, "we are here by permission of Black-Hawk, the representative of the Indians, and now shall we give up the object for which we came? Shall we give up those bright thoughts of a future home, because a band of robbers and savages have notified us to leave the country? Or shall we remain firm to our resolutions, so long as Blaw-Hawk is our friend, go on and locate our claims, and avenge the death of our two friends lying there?"

"Stick to the country and locate our claims!" responded the captain's friends.

"That's the music, boys," put in Old Hurricane; "you fellers are made of the right sort of material—all grit to the backbone; and, as I told you, John, I'll stick to you as long as I sport my own scalp. Yes, boys, I'll help you walz a few of the red barbarians into the brimstone pit."

"Then the matter may be considered permanently settled," said the captain; "but if we remain here about long, we will have to erect some kind of a defense and send an escort up the Chequest for our supply train, which consists of two wagons."

"Wal now, Captain John," said Old Hurricane, "that sounds like business. You couldn't do enny-thing better than to select a good p'int and erect a log defense in which to store your supplies and roost at night."

"To-morrow, then, we will begin the work, but as our tools are all with the wagons, we'll have to send an escort for them at once."

This was soon satisfactorily arranged, and Noisy Nat and three men were at once dispatched for the train. As they had a long distance to travel, it would, very likely, be far into the next day before they would return, even if they met with no difficulty from enemies. This would compel the main party to lie inactive until they returned, for it would not be prudent to attempt to locate more claims now while the Indians were in such a fever of rage and revenge. They could, however, improve the time by looking out for a location for their proposed defense.

Captain Rossgrove never hinted at the great object that was holding him in the country—at what he had seen on the river that night. He kept up a bold exterior and appeared to enjoy the jokes of his friends, but all the while, feelings and pangs of the bitterest kind were rankling in his heart and mind. He had great hopes of Wild Dick bringing some information in regard to Camilla that would afford him temporary relief. If he only knew whether she was an unwilling prisoner—whether she was being abducted or not—the load upon his heart would not be half so painful to bear. Had it not been for the note given him by the mute, his mind would have been left clear from doubt, and for the single conclusion that she was a prisoner, and so his only course would have been plain before him.

The party again concluded to change their camp to prevent another surprise, and the new point selected was a sand-bar, or peninsula jutting out into the river like a wedge. It was about a mile below their present camp, and around its margin was a fringe of dense reeds concealing the approach from the river.

When they arrived at the peninsula the claim-stakers did not strike a fire, but, spreading their blankets on the sand, still warm with solar heat, they threw themselves upon them for repose.

Here they reclined, conversing in a low tone, when Witless Seth, the mute, who had strolled away into the woods along the shore, came bounding into their midst in great excitement.

Captain Rossgrove arose to his feet and fixed an interrogative look upon the mute, which he did not fail to comprehend, for he at once began gesticulating in an excited manner. He succeeded in drawing the attention of our friends to a number of canoes, loaded with Indians, coming up the river.

"It's a hull convoy of the red barbarians," said Old Hurricane, "and that's no tellin' what deviltry they're up to, John."

"Do you think they will pass without discovering us?" asked the captain.

"It's hard to tell. They've hounds' noses on a scent, and I opine we'd better bush ourselves till they pass."

"Then to a concealment, boys," said Captain Rossgrove.

"Here, right here in these reeds will be a mag-

nimbom place, boys," said Old Hurricane, leading the way toward the fringe of tall stalks.

The whole party hastily ensconced themselves among the dense reeds on the upper side of the peninsula, where they could command a view of both the sand-bar and the river.

In a moment all was still as though the place had never been called from the silence of the great Void. But this lasted only for a moment. The dip of many paddles soon came to the ears of the listeners. Each splash of the blade grew louder and louder as the canoes approached. The sounds, however, seemed to be bearing in toward the west shore of the river, as though the voyagers intended to land. All at once the dip of paddles ceased, then followed a dull thump—thump, like persons leaping to the ground and the next minute there came a heavy crashing through the reeds on the lower side of the peninsula, and two score of Indian warriors made their appearance on the bar, within ten paces of our friends.

"By heavens, captain, they've landed on the peninsula!" whispered Harry Dudley.

"Yes, yes!" replied the captain; "but, as we value our lives, let us keep silent. One sound will betray our presence!"

"But our tracks will do that anyhow, captain."

"There is scarcely a doubt of it, but let us trust to fortune. If I could only communicate with Old Hurricane, he might suggest some way to get us out of this trap, but he is several yards away, and the least movement will cause these reeds to stir and rustle."

A profound silence reigned within that dense border of stalks, and the murmur of the savages' voices proved a decided relief to our friends, for they were afraid their own breathing would betray their presence.

Every movement the foe made was carefully noted by the whites. They saw some of them lay aside their rifles and depart into the forest. They saw them return a few minutes later with loads of dry sticks and boughs, which were deposited in the center of the peninsula.

By this it was readily perceived what was up. The savages were going to strike a fire, and now new fears were entertained by our friends. The light would be sure to reveal their tracks in the sand, and these would lead to their discovery in the reeds.

"Tell yer friends to yer right," said Old Hurricane, to the man at his side, "to keep a sharp look-out, a stiff upper lip, and red dy for the wust. If we're discovered, we'll have to make a dash for our lives and a rush for the woods."

The old borderman's advice was communicated from one to the other of the party, and every one nerved himself for the worst.

A fire was kindled by the warriors in the center of the peninsula. Then most of them threw themselves on the earth around it in positions of listless repose. Some filled the bowls on the head of their tomahawks and began to smoke, while others entered into a low conversation.

Our friends gaze upon the scene before them. They can see the warriors puffing the white smoke from their nostrils. They can see every lineament of the swarthy features. They can see the rise and fall of their naked breasts. They can see the glow of their evil, glittering eyes; and all these conspire to impress them—the whites—more forcibly with the great peril of their situation.

While the savages remained there upon the bar, there was no avenue of escape open to the whites. The river was at their backs, and to reach the woods they would be compelled to expose themselves to the Indians' eyes and rifles.

Several minutes dragged by.

A profound silence settled over the peninsula.

At length a cry from one of the savages breaks up on every ear.

The warrior has discovered a white man's track in the sand.

A word, and every warrior was upon his feet.

Our friends' greatest fears were realized. "Look out, boys, the tug is comin!" was Old Hurricane's injunction, communicated from man to man.

Like a hound, the savage that had made the discovery glided hither and thither over the peninsula. He moved outward toward the reeds, his form bent forward and his eyes fixed upon the sand. He was well in toward the reeds on the western extremity of the bar, when he came to a sudden stop. His acute ear had caught a rustle among the reeds.

The eyes of our friends are upon his movements. He stands motionless, he is listening.

Suddenly there is a sharp rustle in the reeds—something clips through the blades. The savage utters a cry of agony, staggers and falls to the earth under a violent blow from an unseen hand!

Friends rush to his side and bend over him. A cry wails from their lips. They shrink back from the fallen warrior with terror written upon their dusky faces. Two words pass from lip to lip:

"Scarlet Death!"

The Demon had slain the warrior! The Demon was in the reeds, and the claim-stakers started too, when they had been apprised of the fact.

For a moment the savages stand appalled; then the sound of a new terror fills their ears. It is a low, plaintive cry as if of agony. It comes from the depth of their camp-fire, as though something was perishing in the crackling flame.

The astonished, terrified savages fix their eyes upon the fire. Those painful cries increase. They see the fire is disturbed. There is life within it, and terror-stricken the red-men turn and flee from the spot—away into the deep, dark forest.

But still that cry in the flames is heard.

Suddenly a figure issued from the reeds into the glare of the light.

It was the figure of Old Hurricane, and his brown, bearded face was convulsed with silent laughter.

"Come out, boys," he at length called, "the red varlets have waltzed away like autumn leaves in terror. They'll venture hereaways no more to-night."

The claim-stakers, followed by Witless Seth, the mute, came from their concealment and joined the hunter.

And still that piteous cry in the flames was heard, though it was growing fainter each moment.

"I'll end that poor critter's sufferin'," said Old Hurricane, and advancing to the fire he brushed aside the brands with his moccasined foot, and but a few inches under the surface of the sand he found a large mud-turtle in the last agonies of death.

The mystery of the flame stood explained.

Near the fallen savage that bore the mark of Scarlet Death, the imprint of a cloven hoof was found leading into the reeds. But, despite all these mysteries and dangers, Old Hurricane uttered a yell of triumph that rolled in prolonged echoes through the forest aisles.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUMB SPY AT WORK.

We will now leave the claim-stakers for a while to follow up the adventuresome footsteps of Wild Dick, the hunter, who, it will be remembered, went to the Dispute to personate his mute brother, Witless Seth.

By following the directions detailed to him by his mute brother, a few hours' brisk walking brought him to the outskirts of the little settlement or village called Spain. The place lay plainly revealed by the moonlight, and gaining a prominence from whence he could command a general view of the place, Dick proceeded to locate the different prominent buildings, as he had already located them in his mind from the description given by his brother. This being accomplished, satisfactorily to himself at least, he proceeded on toward Beaver Lake, where Seth was to meet Lieutenant Thoms and his men.

The bright glimmer of the little sheet of water soon burst upon his view; then, with careful footsteps, he approached the point where the outlaws were to congregate. He had no difficulty in finding them, for the stormy voice of the impatient lieutenant was distinctly heard several rods away. He had grown restless and impatient with waiting, and cursed, with impotent rage, the stupidity of Witless Seth, for being absent so long.

For a moment Wild Dick hesitated. He now realized more fully the great risk he was running, but, having placed a good-sized pebble in his mouth, and nerved himself for his first appearance in the star role of the Dumb Spy, he marched boldly forward to beard the lion in his den!

"Ah!" sneered the lieutenant, as he emerged from the shadows of the undergrowth, "here's the stupid snail at last."

"Dick drew a breath of relief, for he saw the robbers did not detect his disguise, which he felt satisfied they would do at first sight, if they did at all."

Thoms advanced close to him, and raising his hand so that his fingers could be distinctly seen, asked, in the mute language:

"Have you been to those claim-stakers' camp?"

The Dumb Spy informed him that he had by a nod of the head; then Thoms communicated the fact to his friends.

"How many of them are there?" he then questioned the spy.

"Twelve," the latter replied, with a flash of his fingers.

"And where are they camped?"

"On Chequest Creek, four miles from the river."

"Are they well armed?"

"Not very well."

"Are they pretty cautious?"

"No."

"Hurrah!" shouted Thoms, turning to his friends and imparting the information just received.

"*Sacre! Mon ami!*" exclaimed the enthusiastic French robber, Godic, "we then have one grand time. *Vive la spy!* He one grand instetush to have on our employ."

"Yes," replied Thoms, "the Dumb Spy is just fool enough to tell the truth, coward enough to be careful, and withal, a very valuable tool. But see here, boys, we had better make that trip on horseflesh, for it is several miles up to the Chequest."

"I'm heartily agreed to that, lieutenant," replied a comrade.

"And I, and I," responded the others.

"Then let us get our horses and be off at once," said Thoms.

As they moved away, the lieutenant turned to the Dumb Spy, and raising his hand, said with his fingers:

"Seth, you can go to your nest and go to bed. We'll need your services to-morrow night again."

The Dumb Spy replied to the robber with simply a nod, and then trudged on behind him into the village, his sides shaking with suppressed laughter over the success of his adventure and the ignorance of the outlaws.

Thoms and his men were soon mounted and flying northward toward the Chequest, with all possible speed.

Dick found his brother's "nest," as Thoms had designated the room occupied by the mute, but, instead of going to bed, he went out and spent a good portion of the night strolling through the village, familiarizing himself with its location and prominent features.

Late in the night, while thus wandering about, he was suddenly startled by the sound of voices and footsteps approaching from the direction of the river. Hurrying in the direction from whence these sounds emanated, he caught sight of half a dozen

men moving through the village. Four of them were carrying a kind of litter upon which lay what he supposed to be the figure of a woman.

He mentally resolved to follow this party and see what they had and where they went to, but the next moment the clatter of horses' hoofs broke upon the air, and, to elude discovery, he was compelled to seek shelter around the angle of a cabin.

Then a party of horsemen swept apart. He saw they were Thoms and his men returning from their nocturnal raid upon the claim-stakers.

As those on foot had, by this time, passed out of sight, the Dumb Spy beat a hasty retreat to his room. This was a small apartment in the rear of a large cabin, the front room of which was known as the "court-room," where "Judge" Raft dispensed the Club Laws of the Dispute, in assumed earnestness; but, as the "Judge" was also the notorious outlaw chief, Reckless Ralph, the court-room at times became the council-room of the freebooters. In fact, where a single sentence for the punishment of a crime was pronounced within that room, a dozen crimes that were never punished found a birthplace there.

The Dumb Spy's room was meekly furnished. A stool, a rude, rickety table, and a small couch of furs and blankets constituted the substantial furniture. There were, however, various other articles that served as ornaments, such as shells, large pronged stag-horns, and a collection of stuffed birds and small animals. All these had been gathered by the mute, from time to time. The outlaw captain favored him in all his whims, for he considered him just shallow enough in mind to make him a faithful servant and spy. But in this the robber was mistaken. He himself was the dupe, for there were few possessed of a brighter mind than the so-called Witless Seth. His stupidity was only assumed to enable him to work out an object of which Reckless Ralph little dreamed.

Dick had scarcely made himself familiar with his surroundings when the sound of a booted foot in the adjoining apartment startled him. This was succeeded by a faint beam of light streaming through a crack in the partition separating his room from the "Judge's" office.

Applying his eye to the opening, Dick gave the court-room a personal inspection. He saw a tall, fine-looking man, with a dark eye and handsome face, seated near a long table toying with the hilt of a knife, ever and anon glancing impatiently toward the door as if expecting some one. As Dick rightly judged, this was the notorious robber-chief, Reckless Ralph.

A moment later another man entered the court-room. It was Lieutenant Thoms.

Dick bent his ear to the crack and listened.

"Hullo, good-evening, Judge," Thoms shouted, "I'm pleased to see your manly face in Spain again, which, of itself, speaks of your success abroad."

A clear, musical laugh pealed from the lips of the outlaw-chief, as he replied:

"Did you get my note, Thoms?"

"I did, and forthwith I sent Witless Seth out to spy the enemy's numbers and location. When he came back, we mounted our horses and rode up to exterminate the claim-stakers. But what do you think! Why, we found the camp deserted, and Jules Devreaux lying dead as a door-nail within it!"

"The furies! Jules Devreaux dead!" exclaimed Reckless Ralph.

"Yes, dead, and bearing the mark of that accursed Demon, Scarlet Death."

"And what about the claim-stakers?"

"They were gone; every mother's son of them had left for parts unknown."

Reckless Ralph arose and paced the floor like one in deep and painful meditation.

"Curse that Scarlet Death!" he at last broke forth; "he will be the death of us all yet. I tell you, Cale Thoms, that lurking fiend must be hunted down; and that ere it is too late. I will put Witless Seth upon his trail, and if there is a hound in creation that can track him to his lair, it is that dumb fool."

Wild Dick ground his teeth with rage when he heard his unfortunate brother thus spoken of.

"Yes, to-morrow's the day," he heard the outlaw continue. "I will put the Dumb Spy on the track of that Demon and the claim-stakers. If we can get wind of where they encamp to-morrow night, they'll not escape again."

"Just so," mused the spy, warming under the spirit of his adventure.

The outlaws conversed a while longer, then left the court-room.

Dick sought his couch to rest, but not to sleep. The thoughts revolving through his mind banished all desire for slumber. Almost step by step he reviewed the perilous grounds over which he had traveled since leaving the claim-stakers' camp.

The night wore slowly away. Early the following morning the Dumb Spy was summoned into the presence of Reckless Ralph in the court-room.

The outlaw fixed a gaze upon him that made him almost tremble through fear of being detected. But the keen-eyed robber failed to penetrate the disguise, and a sense of relief came to Wild Dick when the outlaw held up his hand and asked in the mutes' language:

"Have you been sick, Seth?"

The mute shook his head.

"Well, then, I have some work for you," the robber chief replied; and so he proceeded to instruct the spy in the work he desired him to perform.

With a vacant, simple smile, well assumed, the Dumb Spy replied, in his silent language:

"All right, captain; I'll find them for you."

So saying, he left the room, and shortly after he was moving northward through the woods.

It was night ere he returned. He found a number of the outlaws assembled in the court-room, armed

to the teeth. They were there waiting the return of the spy, who at once imparted to Reckless Ralph the information that the claim-stakers were encamped on the Des Moines river, at the mouth of Chequest creek.

This, however, was not exactly the case. The claim-stakers had been encamped there the night before, and to make the outlaws believe that it had recently been deserted, the spy stirred up the old camp-fire and heaped an arm-load of fuel upon it. Then he returned to Spain; not, however, before he had seen his friends and apprised them of what was going on.

Feeling certain of the destruction of the claim-locators, Reckless Ralph and a score of his men set out for the mouth of Chequest creek.

By midnight they were all back at Spain, in the court-room, holding what might be termed an indignation meeting.

The Dumb Spy in his room heard all, and knew at once the cause of their wrath. They had found the camp of the trespassers deserted. They knew the spy had not been mistaken, for the remains of their camp-fire were still smoldering there. All this he learned from their remarks.

The band was finally dismissed to meet at dark the next night. Reckless Ralph, Lieutenant Thoms, and another called Doctor Grimm, however, remained in the room for further discussion of the escape of the claim-locators.

"I'll tell you, boys," said the doctor, after the men had all left, "them claim-stakers are causin' us some trouble, and before we git rid of them, we've got to git rid of somethin' else, I'm thinkin'."

"You're too deep for me, doctor," said Reckless Ralph.

"Well, to come right to the point, there's a traitor in our midst, else them claim-stakers would never have got wind of our movements this second time. Now do you see what I'm drivin' at?"

"Perhaps Witless Seth is going back on us?" said Thoms.

"No, never," replied Reckless Ralph. "Seth is too faithful to his master to be led away. You cannot turn a dog against his master; besides, Seth is not possessed of the right kind of courage to be a traitor; and then he's wanting in intellect to carry out any such points, even were he so disposed; and being dumb, he cannot communicate with other people."

"That's my opinion, Judge," replied Grimm; "if that is a traitor—and I know 'most there is—it's one of the Moles."

The Moles were a class of the outlaws who were considered, by their friends, without principle; and who would as soon steal from a confederate as any other person. In fact, they had to be watched by the respectable (?) class of robbers, who, at the same time, could do nothing to offend them, through a fear of their turning "State's evidence," upon them.

"Yes, it must be one of the Moles," said Thoms, in reply to Grimm; "but, then, how are we going to find out which one it is? If we should hint such a thing against any one of them, and he should hear it, why, he'd blow our profession to the first 'pirate-hunter' that came this way."

"Well, we must find out whether there is a traitor in our midst," said the outlaw chief.

"Yes, but how, in Heaven's name, will you do it?"

"Lay our plans where no prying ears can hear us."

"But where, this side of the middle of the Atlantic ocean, will that place be?"

"Leave it to me; be ready to go from hence in ten minutes. We three can hit upon some plan for future action, and keep it from the men until the moment comes when they'll be needed."

"Well, I'd like to know what the man means," said Thoms.

"Summon Witless Seth here, and you will soon see."

It is useless to say Wild Dick heard all this, and was at quite a loss to know what the outlaw had in view. In a few minutes, however, he was in the presence of the three confederates.

"Seth," said the robber captain, with his fingers, "go at once and bring the large canoe lying at the head of Beaver Lake around to the beach opposite Talbott's cabin. I want you to paddle Grimm, Thoms and myself to the middle of the lake."

The whole matter at once became clear to the mind of Wild Dick, and as he proceeded toward the lake, he could scarcely restrain his emotions, engendered by the joke he was perpetrating upon them.

"Yes—te-he! he!" he snickered to himself, "they propose to hold a council in the middle of the lake, a hundred rods from land, where no ears but their own will hear. I suppose they forgot their God'll hear 'em. Of course they'll take their faithful dog, the dumb fool, Witless Seth, along to man the boat. He can't hear what they say—oh, no; of course he can't—te-he! he!"

He had no trouble in finding the boat. It was a goodly-sized concern, made of skins stretched over a framework of wood. It was lying mostly upon the beach, and as he stooped to the effort of launching it, the spirit of mischief seemed to have whispered something in his ear, and he at once resolved to have some fun with the outlaws at the risk of losing his own life. So, taking out his knife, he cut a round hole in the bottom of the canoe near its center. Then into this he drove a plug of rags which could be removed at will by a slight pressure of the foot.

The craft was now launched, and taking his seat therein, he took up the paddle and put the boat in motion. He soon came to the designated spot.

The trio of worthies were there, and, by order of

Reckless Ralph, the prow of the canoe was turned toward the center of the lake.

Being a skillful hand with the paddle, the Dumb Spy sent the boat skimming over the waters of the lake, at the same time keeping the plug in the bottom of the craft concealed with his foot.

When the desired point was at last reached, the canoe was brought to a stand, and the outlaws entered into the work before them with a spirit of pleasure.

There, under the clear, starry sky, with the tranquil moonlit waters beneath them, with the glories of nature around them—amid scenes that should have inspired their hearts with a love of God, and the glories of his work—there they laid deep and damnable plots for the massacre of, not only the claim-stakers, but the old Indian chief, Black-Hawk. Then with the double assurance that their plans were unknown to all but themselves, Reckless Ralph passed his bottle, and ordered the boat headed for the village.

The Dumb Spy at once complied with the order, and they were soon moving homeward. Raft's tongue, beginning to play loosely from its frequent lubrications with bad liquor, now rattled away incessantly in heaping anathemas upon the claim-stakers' heads.

"Easy, captain, easy; don't go off on a tangent, nor get too hot with passion, or we'll have to give you a bath in the lake," said Dr. Grimm, with a laugh.

"I guess you all need it," mused Wild Dick and with his foot he pressed the plug from the hole in the bottom of the canoe, unobserved.

The pressure of the canoe on the water caused a perfect jet to boil up into the craft, and ere the outlaws were scarcely aware of it, the concern was half filled.

"Fire and furies!" yelled the robber-chief, "the boat's sprung a leak—the bottom's out—she's filling—out, boys, and swim for your lives!"

Out sprang the robber in the lake, followed by his confederates, Grimm and Thoms, and the next instant they were struggling with the waves.

"The mute! the mute!" shouted Thoms, "he'll drown."

"Curse the mute!" spattered the heartless Grimm. Dick, however, was faring very well. Remaining in the sinking canoe, he seized the plug as soon as the last robber was overboard, and stopped the leak. Then, with the paddle, he began bailing the water out, and ere this was accomplished to suit himself, being unusually particular about this time, the outlaws were some distance away swimming for dear life.

Reckless Ralph and Thoms made their way safely to the shore, but Grimm was never heard of again, until a month later, a pack of vultures hovering in the air, drew the attention of the robbers to the south side of the lake, where they found his body washed ashore.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO ANGELS.

It will be remembered that Nolsy Nat and three of the claim-stakers were sent to bring up the train belonging to the party, and that they were expected to return on the day following their departure. The time allotted for the party's return went by, but they did not come. Two days passed without their appearance, and now misgivings of a serious nature began to rise. During the two days of waiting the claim-stakers had lain inactive for want of necessary tools to begin their fort. Besides, their whereabouts had become known to the robbers and Indians, and it required all the stratagem the Dumb Spy could employ to keep them on the wrong trail.

The train not having made its appearance on the third day after Nat's departure, the fears of the party assumed an active form, and it was decided to send out a second party to investigate the cause of the train's non-appearance.

Old Hurricane and Harry Dudley volunteered their services for the trip, and the two took their departure, going in a north-westerly direction.

Their course, after leaving the Des Moines timber, lay through a rough and hilly section of country, covered with a dense growth of red brush, and diversified with small, murmuring water-courses.

Toward the close of the day, Old Hurricane informed his companion that they were drawing near the western boundary of the Black-Hawk Purchase, and that about six miles north of where they would touch the line was the point where the claim-stakers had left their train.

"I do not know whether I'll be able to make the trip or not," said young Dudley, with a look of fatigue.

"Why, lad, I'm just gettin' warmed up; but, then, I'm used to it," said the old hunter.

"I presume there is no one living through these parts," said Dudley, impressed with the desolate solitude of the surrounding hills, over which the shadows of twilight were stealing.

"Yes, Harry," replied the old borderman, "off hereaways there are two cabins. That's two families livin' there, but I've allers been a leetle luberous of them. They've too much intercourse with them Dispute fellers. But, I sw'ar, lad, that's some fine—yes, angel-lookin' gals round that. I know they're out of their place, too, just as much as a rose would be among a bed of Canada thistles."

This information did not kindle a spark of enthusiasm in Harry's breast. The words of the hunter fell with indifference on his ears, while with most young men it would have stirred a spirit of adventure. But Harry had reason for his passive demeanor. A secret locked within his young heart excluded all other emotions in which a woman's face or charms were concerned.

The two journeyed on. It was near sunset when the keen eye of Old Hurricane detected a thin column of white smoke curling heavenward from a patch of bushes that crowned an adjacent bluff.

A halt was at once made.

"I must inquire into that smoke, Harry, hereaways," said Old Hurricane. "It may be friends and it may not. We hunters never let ourselves into danger with our eyes open, tho' familiarity with dangers of'en blunts one's sensibilities. I'll just make a detour thereaways, and, if it's friends I'll signal to you from yander bald ridge. If it's enemies, I'll slip back here again," and the next moment the form of the hunter was lost to view among the dense shrubbery.

Harry now had a moment for mental speculation, but a keen sense of his loneliness impressed his mind so forcibly as to create a desire for a more perfect view of his surrounding, and, ascending a little knoll, he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and pushing back his hat to allow the breeze to fan his heated brow, he swept the landscape.

Behind him, to his left, and in front, rough wooded hills shut off a distant view, but down the valley, to his right, he could see where the hills melted into a level plain, that rolled away westward for weary leagues. He could see small streams, now glimmering in the rays of the setting sun, winding with the sinuosity of a serpent across the bosom of the green expanse; and, while he stood gazing upon this scene, he suddenly caught sight of two cabins standing close in under the shadows of the bluffs, where the prairie began.

The young surveyor felt certain they were the same cabins of which Old Hurricane had made mention, for he saw, by the smoke rising from the chimney tops, that they were occupied.

While he stood watching for other signs of life about the cabins, the sound of voices and the tramp of approaching feet arrested his attention.

Turning, he saw two men coming down the valley toward him. There was a rough, brigandish look about their features, dress and movements that impressed Harry with no favorable opinion of them, and so he at once concealed himself in a clump of bushes.

The men came on, talking in unguarded tones as men will talk in conflict of opinions.

Harry bent his ear and listened. "One of them was saying:

"No, this thing's run on long enough, Mobile. Fur three years we've been dilly-dallyin' along about the price of that girl; but I'll not give a red more than I've offered; and ten to one that fellow will git wind of her being in these diggin's, and then we'll have her stolen from both of us."

From this Harry gleaned that a girl was being sold by one of the villains to the other. He listened for Mobile's reply. He heard him say:

"Your talk 'bout that feller, Thoms, will have little bearin' on my decision, for I won't scare. However, I guess you can take her at your figures, and I tell you, she's devilish cheap, for that's not a purtier face this side of the Mississippi. If she war my own chick, cussed if you'd git her fur twic't that price. She and Dolly are out ridin' now. Lordy, but that Dolly 'll bring me a snug fortune some day."

"Suppose they should meet them claim-stakers while out riding?" asked Thoms, the outlaw lieutenant.

"It'd be all up atwixt you and Dora."

Had a clap of thunder burst over his head, Harry would not have started more violently than when he heard that name spoken.

"Dora! Dora!" he repeated to himself. "Can it be my Dora, whom a cruel fate tore from me?"

He started. As if in answer to the question he would have asked himself, the clatter of horses' hoofs, mingled with the clear, musical laugh of a young girl, rung out on the evening air, and the next moment two young girls, mounted upon spirited ponies, came galloping down the valley and swept a path Harry like the wind.

But he had caught a sight of their faces, and he started up, as if to pursue them. The color receded from his face, then arose to his lips the words:

"Dora! Dora!"

But the words were drowned in the clatter of the ponies' feet, and, before he could repeat them, Dora had swept from view down the valley.

"Dora, my darling!" he exclaimed, as if starting from a trance. "I thank the fate that sent me here—that discovered you to me! I must see you, Dora, and—"

"Do you know 'em, Harry?"

Harry started. Old Hurricane stood at his side. He had approached unobserved, and had heard the young man's soliloquy.

Harry's face turned red, and he became greatly confused.

"Don't take on, lad," said the old hunter; "do you know them girls, or were't love at first sight?"

"No, Hurricane, no. The one on the brown pony I know well, and I will tell you all about it, Hurricane. Her name is Dora Marlin. Four years ago I became acquainted with her in Illinois. We were in each other's society a great deal, and finally—finally—"

"Fell in love, eh?" interrupted the hunter with a pleasant chuckle.

"Well, yes," continued Harry, "our acquaintance grew into love, and we were to have been married. But a week before the time fixed for our marriage, Dora disappeared. Where she went to, and why she went away, have been a mystery to me ever since. Some hinted that she had gone away to avoid me, but I never believed it, Hurricane, never. And now that I have found her, I must have an interview with her before I leave."

"That's true love and royal grit, Harry," said Old

Hurricane; "and count me one in case of trouble. But, let me tell you the news. I met Noisy Nat a few minutes ago. He war over this way scoutin'—lookin' after that same smoke. He says the train's all right, and 'll reach the river to-morry. They had some trouble; their mules strayed off, and they had to hunt two days for 'em. They're encamped now 'bout two miles from here. So now, Harry, as the train's all right, and we've nothin' partic'lar to do, we might see 'bout this love affair of your'n. I'm not much on makin' love myself, but many's the chap I've backed in sich diffikilt scrapes. I've never did run smooth, even on the border. But I'll bet thar's some devilish mean work 'bout that girl Dora runnin' off from you. She never done it of her own free will, no sir! she's too much of an angel to be so mean. Many's the chat I've had with her; and I swear, lad, it's music to listen to the rattle of her tongue, and that of her little sister Dolly, as the other girl is called. Whenever I feel down in the mouth, I go there jist to hear them angels talk and sing; then I feel better. And it's not *Old Hurricane* with them, Harry; it's *Uncle Hurricane*; and I'm jist fool enough to think, lad, that they were aers pleased to see me come. Dolly's got a lover, too—a hunter-boy, and friend of mine. He's called the Boy Ranger, tho' his name is Ransom Kendall, and a braver boy never set a trap nor drew bead on a red-skin. But then, it's no use talkin', Harry. Dolly and Dora's not Ole Abel Mobile's darters. I can tell kith and kin at sight."

"Then you have been about their place frequently?" said Harry.

"Many's the time, lad; but I aers thought the men were rascals. They've give me several hints to keep away from their premises, but the girls beg me to come back and tell 'em stories; and I sw'ar, boy, I'd walk through fire to hear the music of them girls' tongues. But you remember that smoke I went to see about? Well, thar's a pack of Ingins camped there, and Abel Mobile and that Thoms had been there visitin' with 'em, and I know thar's deviltry on foot, for the reds are in war-paint."

Harry made no reply. He became silent and thoughtful. He was thinking how he could bring about an interview with Dora.

Old Hurricane read his thoughts and said: "Leave it all to me, lad, and before another sun rises you shall see your Dora. Come, let's be movin', for if you'll look hereaways, you'll see the figure of a lopin' red-skin skulkin' among the undergrowth."

CHAPTER X.

THE BOY RANGER AND THE HOT TRAIL.

It was night, but the great round moon was up, its silvery beams making checkers of light and shadow beneath a great spreading oak, where, to and fro, a figure paced in silent restlessness.

The figure was that of a man, but the moonbeams falling upon his face told he was a boy in years. He was dressed in the garb of a hunter, and in his belt was a knife and brace of pistols, while against the trunk of a tree under which he waited, leaned a handsome rifle.

As the moments stole on, the lithe figure of a female glided from the dense shadows of the undergrowth, and approached the impatient youth.

The young hunter clasped the figure in his arms; and as he pushed back the shawl that was thrown hood-like over her head, he gazed into the rosy, dimpled face and dark lustrous eyes of Dolly Mobile, his betrothed.

"Still true to me as ever, my darling little girl," the impulsive youth said, imprinting a kiss on her fair brow.

"Why shouldn't I be, Ransom?" she said, in a soft, flute-like tone, as her little dimpled hand stole slyly into his hard palm.

"Oh, they say women are fickle," he replied.

"Some may be; just like the men; but not I, Ransom."

"I thank Heaven for it, Dolly," he replied, joyfully, "for you are all I have in this world to love, and I hope your father has consented to allow me to visit you at his house."

"No, he is obstinate—more so than ever; and to-day I have been very miserable, indeed, and yet I have been happy."

"Why so, Dolly?"

"I have been miserable to learn that Abel Mobile is not my father, and happy, too, to know that I am not the child of such a bad and wicked man."

"Bad and wicked!" repeated Ransom; "I did not think he was worse than the usual border settler. All are more or less reckless and rough."

"I know it, Ransom, but most of them carry an honest heart, and this Abel Mobile does not. He is leagued with the outlaws of the Dispute, and he has actually sold poor Dora to Cale Thoms, of Spain, and has received gold for her. She is to be taken away to-morrow."

"Great Heaven! is this possible? Are you not mistaken, Dolly?"

"I am not, Ransom; and you are to hear the worst yet: there was a man named Jack Hupp here yesterday, to buy me."

"Oh, God!" groaned the young ranger; "Abel Mobile must be a human monster! But tell me, Dolly, what was the result of the interview of Hupp and Mobile?"

"The bargain was not closed. They stood on a difference of a few dollars. But Hupp was to be back soon, and then, Ransom, I fear the result will go against me."

"Then Mobile is neither your father, nor Dora's?"

"No. Dora is the child of his wife's sister, and I am the child of his first wife, who was a widow when he married her; so he is only a stepfather, and a cruel one, too. When we moved from Montrose here, he kidnapped Dora and brought her along;

and don't you think, Ransom, she was to have been married a week afterward to a young man of whom she talks a great deal."

"And why has she never attempted to escape?"

"She is afraid to. She is watched and threatened with all kinds of punishments. Besides, she has given up in despair of ever meeting her lover again."

"This is a hundred-fold worse than I could ever have dreamed of Abel Mobile. Speculating in human lives—selling innocent girls to brutal robbers! Dolly, you and Dora both must go with me—you must be saved from these villains' power. I will take you to the settlement, about fifty miles north of here. There you will find friends and safety. You must go, Dolly; I will listen to no protest."

"But if I should consent, and we be caught in our flight—oh, Ransom! I shudder to think what the forfeit will be."

"Once clear of these hills, Dolly, and I defy the power of Abel Mobile to get us. My horse is near here, and you and Dora can ride, and I will walk and lead the way."

"But you forget Mobile's hounds, Ransom," she said.

"I care not for them. I can manage them, Dolly; so go now, and state the matter to Dora, and tell her to come with you at once."

"Oh, Ransom! Ransom!" Dolly cried, hesitating between a sense of right and wrong; "this is a dangerous, and, I fear, an imprudent step for me to take, is it not, Ransom?"

"No, Dolly, it is a step that duty necessitates, for if you remain here, your young life, now so free and innocent, will be brought to shame and suffering. Do not be afraid of being caught, though our old friend Hurricane was here now."

"Then, Ransom, our chances of escape would be good," interrupted Dolly; "yes, I do wish Uncle Hurricane would happen along."

"I'm right here, my dear youngsters, and have been for the last half-hour."

The lovers started at the sound of the voice, but when they recognized it as that of the object of their wishes, Old Hurricane, their fears turned to joy; and the next moment the old hunter and Harry Dudley stepped from the shadows of the undergrowth before them.

"Oh, thank Heaven!" cried Dolly.

"Your coming has been just in the right hour, this time, Hurricane," said Ransom.

"I presume so, youngster," said the old hunter.

"This chap is my friend, Harry Dudley."

"Harry Dudley!" cried Dolly; "that is his name—the name of Dora's lover!"

"Pardon me, Miss Dolly," said Dudley, apologetically; "but we have had the extreme impudence to permit ourselves to be eavesdroppers to your interview. I have heard your story about Dora. Now, while Abel Mobile and his companions are reveling in a drunken spree, pray, will you not see Dora and tell her Harry Dudley awaits an interview with her? Tell her I discovered her whereabouts by accident, and am here to save her."

Wild with excitement and joy, Dolly fluttered away into the shadows toward the cabins, eager to deliver her message to Dora.

The trio, waiting under the oak, planned the course for their flight with the maidens, and it was at once decided to seek the camp of the claim-stakers, until something further was determined upon.

"The minutes wore by. It was nearly time for the maidens' coming, when a silence that was unnatural in its intensity settled over the premises. This was suddenly succeeded by the shrieks of female voices calling for help, mingled with fierce, brutal execrations."

Full well the trio under the oak knew its meaning. The maidens had been captured in their attempted flight.

"Great God, Hurricane, they must be rescued!" cried Dudley, almost frantic.

"Yes, if we have to take them dead," added the Boy Ranger.

"Take it cool, lads. We'll not leave these diggin's without 'em gals. Come, let's mosey right into the cabin afore they harm them."

Noiselessly the three glided from under the oak and approached the cabin of Abel Mobile.

At the door they paused. They heard the weeping and sobbing of the maidens and threats and execrations of Mobile.

"Stay right here, boys, till I call you," said Old Hurricane; then turning, he pushed the door open and strode unceremoniously into the room.

"What the cats is up in here?" he exclaimed, in his usual stormy tone, as he planted himself in the middle of the floor, and gazing about in well-affected wonder, took in the situation.

He saw the maidens locked in each other's embrace, seated on a bench in one corner. Abel Mobile stood near them with the shawls which he had just torn from the girls' shoulders, laying on his arm, while Cale Thoms and another man, whom the hunter recognized as the notorious Jack Hupp, sat on the opposite side of the room with a drunken leer on their besotted, bloated features.

At sight of Old Hurricane, who had swept like a tornado into the cabin, Mobile ceased his cursing, and turning, confronted the intruder with a savage frown; but, when he saw who it was before him, his features assumed a different expression.

"Ho, Hurricane, ole friend," he exclaimed, with well-affected pleasure on meeting him; "be seated, man; be seated!"

"I declar' I thought the house was afire, I heard sich a noise in here," replied the hunter, declining the proffered seat, "and so I jist dropped in to 'quire into the matter."

"Oh, it's all right now, Hurricane; I war' jist lecturin' them runaway gals; devilish impident little

tigers to go lopin' around through the woods arter night—away from their paternal roof."

The maidens having calmed their emotions and discovered who the intruder was, sprung across the room to his side, and clasping him by the hands, cried out:

"Oh, Uncle Hurricane! save us from those bad, wicked men!"

"Now, I'll sw'ar to goodness if this don't beat me!" exclaimed the hunter, with well-feigned surprise; "two little angels flutterin' at my side, and beggin' me to save 'em. What's it mean, Abel?"

Mobile started with an oath and vindictive look toward the maidens, but the old hunter interposed his hand, saying:

"Hold on, Abel, hold on; let's have an explanation of matters. Stand back, Abel; an explanation is wanted."

"He has sold me to that drunken robber!" cried Dora, flashing a wild, terrified look upon Thoms.

"Oh, I pray you will save us, Uncle Hurricane!"

"So, ho!" exclaimed the old hunter, in a thunderous tone, "then this is an auction-room, eh? Here's where sich angels as these are bought and sold, eh? Shades of the Patriarchs! An auction-room! Well, I'll take both of these little buds, and go a cool thousand better than the best. Now look sharp, men; who bids higher? Going, going, going!"

The voice of the giant hunter sounded like that of a trumpet, yet there was that in its intonations that inspired the hearts of those two fair girls nestling at his side with hope, while it seemed to strike awe to the cowardly hearts of the outlaws.

"Let him pay his thousand better and take them, Mobile," said Thoms, with a significant wink which the old hunter saw and interpreted.

"No; I can't pay the cash down to-night, gentlemen," said the hunter, "but I'll give good security; I'll give you Ransom Kendall, the Boy Ranger, and Harry Dudley, claim-stakers. Both are choice fellers—good as gold itself."

"You're inclined to jest, Hurricane," said Mobile, endeavoring to smooth matters over.

"No; I'm in downright earnest—I am, by the gods of Olympus, Abel."

"Then," said Mobile, heating up with rage, "you will leave here at once."

"Well, the girls will have to go with me."

"They shall not!" hissed the infuriated outlaw, springing forward like a tiger to seize the girls. But one blow from the open hand of Hurricane sent the villain waltzing to the other side of the room in a twinkling.

"Run out, gals, the boys are waitin' fur you at the door," said the hunter, and as the maidens hastened to obey his injunction, he braced himself against the wall to meet the attack of Mobile and his companions, who had now rushed to his—Mobile's—assistance. Swift as the lightning's flash the giant plied his fists among the villains, and for a moment a wild confusion reigned. Blows, falling bodies thumping on the floor, yells and execrations filled the air.

The desperation with which the outlaws concentrated all their strength in the effort to overpower the Colossus, proved their own final defeat, for, as they rushed madly upon him, he eluded their grasps and knocked them right and left, and in less than a minute he had all three of them floored. Then, springing across the floor, he blew out the light and glided from the room.

"Away, youngsters!" he exclaimed, to the four young people who stood near, almost unconscious of what was going on around them, so deeply were they plunged into the silent raptures of love; "away, youngsters, and I'll cover your retreat."

The young people at once hurried away in the direction of the point where Ransom had left his horse, while Old Hurricane remained at the door of the cabin listening to the confusion within, his whole frame fairly convulsed with suppressed laughter. The outlaws, not knowing he had escaped from the room, had got to fighting among themselves, each one supposing the other was the hunter. But they soon discovered their ludicrous mistake; then, as they came charging from the cabin, Old Hurricane beat a hasty retreat around an angle of the building and stopped to listen.

"They've escaped, Mobile, they've escaped," he heard Thoms exclaim; "but, get out your bloodhounds and we'll trail them to perdition, but what we catch them! Hurry, Mobile, hurry; bring out your hounds while the trail is fresh!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE WRONG BODY.

OLD HURRICANE shuddered when he heard the deep bay of the bloodhounds as their brutal master brought them from the kennel. As near as he could judge by the sound, there were four of the dogs, and the number he knew was sufficient to endanger the lives of the young fugitives. Even if the outlaw did not turn them loose upon the trail, they would lead them so fast that the fugitives would soon be overtaken. Something must be done at once to avert the peril. But what should it be?

The old hunter asked himself the question and pondered over it. He knew there would be but little chance of throwing the hounds off the trail when once upon it, and so he concluded to rejoin the fugitives, put them on their guard and prepare for the worst.

He turned and moved away into the thicket north of Mobile's cabin, hoping to intercept his friends by a circuitous route near the oak where we first met Ransom and Dolly.

Before he had reached the tree, however, the prolonged blast of a horn rung in startling notes out upon the air. The sound emanated from the rear of Mobile's cabin, and its import was at once made manifest to the old borderman when he heard it an-

answered by a shrill whistle, coming from the top of the very knoll where he had seen a small party of Indians encamped.

He knew at once there was a preconcerted system of telegraphy existing between the outlaws and the Indians—that the former were calling their red allies to their assistance. The savages, added to the bloodhounds, would render the peril of the fugitives imminent, and so, quickening his pace, the hunter pressed on.

Arrived at the oak, he was greatly disappointed at not finding his friends there. He uttered a low whistle in hopes it would reach their ears and elicit a response that would direct him aright. A deep silence succeeded his call. There was no response, nor could he hear a sound, nor discover a sign by which he could determine the course taken by the fugitives. However, there was no time for speculation, and the natural presumption forced itself at once upon his mind that they had gone east toward the river, as had formerly been decided upon, and so he moved briskly away in that direction, expecting to come up with them. But an hour's walk found him still alone.

He was now several miles from the cabins of the outlaws, and scarcely knowing what course to pursue next, he stopped to listen. If he could only hear the baying of the hounds, this, he thought, might give him some clue to the course taken by his friends. But he could hear nothing. A deep and unnatural silence brooded over the woodland, but this was suddenly succeeded by the sharp report of firearms, mingled with piercing screams, wild, savage yells and fierce, brutal execrations.

These sounds came from not over sixty rods from where the old borderman then stood, and they smote like a death-knell upon his ears.

"Too late! Too late!" he exclaimed to himself, as a pang of regret shot through his great breast; "they've been overtaken and all captured. Ah, me! it may go hard with the boys—they may be slain on the spot. But the girls—By the gods of Olympus, I'll make a Golgotha of Inglin and robber-bones but what I rescue them angels! It's no use to whine now, but it were a bad thing when we separated at the cabins for I may and may not have saved 'em all. And I expect they've been a leetle careless, and went billin' and cooin' like lovers would do, through the darkness, and let 'emselvs into a trap. But, Hurricane, move your stumps; you may be in time to render your friends some help."

He listened. He could still hear the sound of excited voices, but nothing by which he could determine the fate of his friends; so, with his rifle at a trail, he crept forward through the woods, stopping occasionally to listen. He soon discovered that those excited voices were stationary, and as he drew closer and closer to them his practiced ear caught a sound like that of water dripping on dry leaves. He stopped, and pressing his ear to the earth, listened intently. He could still hear that slow, mysterious drop, drop. What did it mean? The old hunter scratched his head in dire perplexity. For once in his life he heard a sound for which he could not account. But his curiosity overbalanced his superstition, and he determined to investigate the matter. So he crept silently forward and soon came to the edge of a little moonlit glade, on the margin of which he halted.

Before him lay an old log, and across this lay the half-nude form of an Indian warrior. He was dead, and from a wound in the head drops of blood were falling on a pile of dry leaves collected by the log.

The mystery stood explained, and the old borderman pushed boldly out into the glade and examined the body. He recognized the Indian by his enormous size, being fully as large as the hunter himself, as a notorious war-chief called Strong-Arm, and leader of the party he had seen encamped on the knoll near Mobile's cabin.

He knew at once that this very spot was where his friends had been overtaken, and that Strong-Arm had been slain in the conflict that ensued. But the voices—now toned down—that he could hear were a few rods further south, and so he crept on and came to a halt within ear-shot of them. He heard a rough, rasping voice—which he readily detected as that of the infamous Abel Mobile—saying:

"Yes, my little ladies, you've got yourselves into a purty muss by loopin' off with these two young scamps, who'll hang for their part in the game."

From this Hurricane gleaned that both the maidens and their lovers had been recaptured.

"And now, Thoms," he heard Mobile continue, "as these little runaways 'll not be safe at my cabin while that infernal big Hurricane goes unhung, we'll trot 'em right down to Spain."

"That's the place for 'keeps,'" Thoms exclaimed. Mobile continued:

"Now, I'll run back home with these 'ere hounds, and bring a couple o' ponies to take the runaways on, fur it'll be a long walk fur the likes o' them, tho' I'll warrant they'd 'a' walked to Halifax with these young freebooters."

"All right, Abel," Thoms responded; "we'll wait fur you at the Two Oaks. You see, we've got to do a little hanging before we git rid of these two gal-thieves, and the Two Oaks, you know, is where sich things are done."

"That's the talk, Cale Thoms," replied Mobile; "don't let the rascals pester us any farder, but hang 'em, cuss 'em, hang 'em."

"What will you do with Strong-Arm's carcass, Inglin?" Thoms now inquired of the four Indians that stood over Harry and Ransom with drawn tomahawks.

"We take body long," one of the Indians replied. "Strong-Arm great war-chief—chief and friends be angry if no take body to village—make litter—carry body on."

"Wal, it's no use to try to persuade 'em out o' takin' the body," Mobile said; "so now, Thoms, you and Hupp will have to look sharp. It will take all four o' the Ingins to tote the carcass o' Strong-Arm, and you'll have to take charge o' that pair o' young Indies and brace of gal-thieves. Mebby I'll be at the Two Oaks in time to help boost the gentlemen up."

"And I may be there, too, my dear Abel Mobile," mused Old Hurricane, as the outlaw turned and started on his return to his cabin with his hounds. I will here remark that the dogs had not been turned loose upon the fugitives' trail, else the result would have been serious. They had been held in check by their master, who, with his companions, followed at their heels at a rapid pace; and when the fugitives were overtaken, the fierce brutes were held back by the leash.

The old hunter could not see the parties, for they stood in among the densest shadows, but from what he had heard, he learned this: Harry Dudley and Ransom Kendall were alive and unharmed. But they were prisoners, and were to be hung at the Two Oaks, a point well known to him and situated a mile further east. The girls were both captives also, and were to be taken to Spain for safe-keeping. The captors, since Mobile's departure, numbered six, two outlaws and four Indians.

For some time the hunter argued with himself whether or not he should make a charge upon the foe and attempt his friends' release. But there were two obstacles in the way, either one of which was sufficient to defeat him; and he knew that a failure on his part, in case he should make an attack, would precipitate the execution of Harry and Ransom. One of these obstacles was the overwheating number of the foe, the other was the extreme darkness. However, had it not been for the latter, he would have made the daring attempt. As it was, however, he would have to watch his chances and do the best he could, for he could not bring help in time to save the boys now.

While waiting for the party to make some move, he heard Thoms say:

"Ingins, if you are going to take Strong-Arm's body with you, it's time you were fixin' a litter to string it on."

"Ugh, the pale-face speaks the truth," one of the Indians replied. "Strong-Arm is heavy as he was brave, and it will take all his friends to carry him so far."

As the Indian concluded, the hunter heard the sound of footsteps moving away toward the body of the savage he had found lying across the log in the little glade, and when they had passed him, he arose and followed softly after. On the edge of the glade, where he could not be seen, he paused to watch, for his mind had become deeply engrossed with something of a novel character.

He saw the Indians lift Strong-Arm from the log where he had fallen before the pistol of the Boy Ranger, and lay him on the ground in the center of the glade. Then two of them took from their own shoulders blankets, in which the form of the chief was carefully wrapped from head to foot, with his rifle and tomahawk at his side. This done, one of the savages said, in his own dialect, which Old Hurricane readily understood, and which we translate thus:

"Let each of us go now and get strong poles to make a good, easy litter to carry our dead chief upon."

Then the old borderman saw them unloosen their tomahawks and depart into the dark woods in search of the desired poles.

Several minutes elapsed before they returned, then several more were consumed in constructing the litter. But, when it was at last completed, they lifted the heavy, lifeless body and placed it carefully and tenderly upon the movable couch.

Then a savage took his place at one of the corners of the litter, and signified his friends to take their positions at the other corners. This done, the body was lifted aloft and borne slowly away.

Deluded red-skins! They little dreamed that the body they bore upon the litter was *not* that of their beloved chief, Strong-Arm, but the *LIVING FORM OF THEIR MORTAL FOE, OLD HURRICANE, THE HUNTER.*

CHAPTER XII.

OFF FOR THE TWO OAKS.

SLOWLY, and with solemn tread, the four savages moved away with the supposed lifeless body of their friend, to where the two outlaws, Thoms and Hupp, were impatiently waiting for them. And had it not been for the dense brush crowding upon them and against the frame of the litter, they might have detected a slight, vibratory quiver of the same, caused by Old Hurricane's great form being in a convulsion of suppressed laughter over the success of the cunning trick he was imposing upon his red enemies.

The idea of substituting his form for that of Strong-Arm had been conceived the moment he saw the savages wrapping the chief's body in the blankets. He knew there was not difference enough in his own weight and that of the chief to lead the four savages to detect the imposition, consequently, the moment he saw the warriors depart in search of poles, he glided into the glade, hastily unwrapped and concealed the body of Strong-Arm out among the dense shadows. Then returning to the glade, he spread the two blankets on the ground, allowing them to lap a few inches. With his rifle and Strong-Arm's tomahawk at his side, he now proceeded to roll himself in the blankets. This he effected with the best success by laying down on one edge of the blanket and taking the lower corner between his feet, the middle in his hand, and the upper corner in his teeth, and rolling over and over, thereby wrapping the blanket around him as neatly as though the savages had done it themselves. The blankets being several

inches longer than his body, every portion of his feet and head were concealed, and, having rolled himself to the exact spot where Strong-Arm had been left, he awaited the run of events.

Already we have shown the result of his trick so far as his escape from detection was concerned.

When the savages, with their burden, came to where the outlaws were in custody of the two maidens and their lovers, Thoms asked:

"Are you ready, Frogfoot?"

"Ugh," was the laconic reply of the Indian addressed.

"Then lead the way for the Two Oaks," the robber said; and as the Indians took their position in the lead, Thoms turned to the male captives and said: "And now you two gal-thieves will follow behind the Indians, and remember, two pistols are right at your heads, cocked and primed."

Dora and Dolly were mounted upon the young ranger's horse, which was led behind by Jack Hupp; and the procession being now formed, at once set off through the woods.

A solemn silence now fell over the party—a silence as deep and solemn as a funeral cortege moving away through the lonely halls of the night. Perhaps, since the outlaws had had time for a moment's reflection, they had become impressed with that mournful spirit which the presence of death inspires in the hardest hearts, for the dark outlines of the motionless form on the litter was directly before their eyes.

If this was the case, a different feeling would have been inspired, had they suddenly become aware that old Hurricane was upon the litter.

"Well, well, Hurricane, this is a good 'un on the red-skins—perhaps the best you ever played on the varlets," the old borderman mused, as he was borne carefully on, every sinew stiffened to maintain the rigidity of a dead man, his teeth pressed upon his lips to keep back the stormy emotions that were struggling within his breast, threatening to seek relief in open expression: "yas, it's a good 'un on the red guttersnipes. How keeful they tread—like pall-bearers! Now, if Big-Foot war only here to whistle a dead march, or Yankee Doodle, what an imposin' pageant it *would* be! And, sweet Moses! what a soothin' effect it has on one's nerves, this gentle swayin' o' the bier! I swar, it's a leetle the softest thing I ever got a hold on—but, Lordy! wouldn't they drop me like a hot cake if they find out the joke?"

Thus the daring hunter mused with his own thoughts as he was carried on and on through the dark woods, the soft tread of his conductors' feet being the only sound that broke the solemn silence.

At length the party came to a halt, and the hunter felt himself lowered, and placed carefully upon the ground.

They were at the Two Oaks.

Leaving the captives in charge of the four savages, Thoms and Hupp proceeded to strike a fire under the two oaks. This they soon accomplished, and the great spreading boughs of the two gnarled oaks, and the smooth, grassy sward beneath, were lit up with a bright glow.

The young surveyor and Boy Ranger were at once lashed to one of the oaks, while the maidens were tied to a small sapling, not far from the litter upon which reposed the dead Strong-Arm.

The outlaws now turned upon the young men, and began taunting them with the most heartless provoking language they could command. But not an expression of fear became visible upon the prisoners' brows. On the contrary, a look of cool, calm defiance met the gaze of their captors' eyes.

"Oh, my young hearties!" the brutal Hupp at last exclaimed, "we'll soon take the temper outen you!"

"Do your worst, you bloated wretch," replied the Boy Ranger, with a scornful flash of the eyes; "we will have the consolation of knowing while we do live that you'll get your dues at the hands of your master, the devil."

"Frogfoot!" exclaimed the outlaw, enraged by the youth's words, "bring me the lariat attached to that saddle, and I'll string this impudent young rascal to one o' these limbs in a giffy!"

The Indian brought the lariat, one end of which Hupp at once adjusted around the young ranger's neck.

Little Dolly seeing these preparations for the execution of her lover, began begging in a wild, despairing voice, for the robbers to spare his life. But the unnatural monsters only laughed at her appeals, and went on with the preparations for the execution. Dolly now burst forth in wild, frantic sobs and cries that rung tremulously through the forest like the wail of a lost spirit.

"Hupp!" exclaimed Thoms, indignantly, "stop that little wench's mouth. Her wildcat screams might bring that skulkin' big giant, Old Hurricane, upon us."

"Humph!" exclaimed Hupp, "I should think six of us could manage him, but"—turning to Dolly—"see here, little woman, you must hush this noise. I'll stop your mouth with a kiss, so I will."

"Fiend, do not come near me!" she cried, fiercely, her eyes flashing with deadly scorn. "If you touch me, I pray Heaven will strike you dead!"

"Now I *will* have a kiss," the burly ruffian said, advancing and taking the pretty pale face of the maiden between his hard palms and stooping to kiss her.

But before he had accomplished his insulting design, he started back while a cry of agony wailed from his lips. With both hands he began clutching wildly at his breast, over which his shirt was tightly drawn, and from between his fingers, his friends, as well as the captives, saw a tiny stream of blood, spurting in crimson jets.

"Oh, God, I'm killed!" groaned the wretch, and staggering to and fro in vain attempts to keep his feet to the last, he finally fell like a log to the earth.

His friends ran to his side, and found he was dead! He had been stabbed in the breast, with a broad-bladed knife. But who had dealt the blow? Was it the vengeance of Heaven invoked by Dolly?

A look of terror settled upon the features of Thoms and the warriors. Even the captives felt a shudder creep over them.

A silence deep as that of death settled over the place, and in the midst of it Dolly suddenly became conscious of a low, suppressed breathing behind her.

She mechanically turned her head and gazed around her. She saw nothing, for nothing was behind her but the motionless form in the blanket. Upon this, however, her attention was at length fixed, and she started with a chill of terror creeping over her, and her heart seemed to leap into her throat and choke her, when she discovered a pair of gleaming, scintillating eyes fixed upon her through small holes in the blanket, in which she supposed the dead savage lay wrapped!

Almost simultaneous with this discovery—before she could command utterance to speak, or cry out—she saw a sudden movement of the blanket, and the supposed lifeless form began rolling rapidly along the ground. A few evolutions freed the body of the old hunter from the enveloping folds of the blankets; then with a shout, equal to the roar of a lion, he sprang to his feet, and charged upon the astonished, terrified enemy.

"Down, down to the brimstone pit!" he roared, as he struck right and left; "down, you essence of sin! Whoop! whoop! hoof it, you cowardly guttersnipe!"

The last words were directed to Thoms, who, seeing his savage friends knocked in every direction, had turned and sought safety by flight into the forest.

The savages had been taken completely by surprise; and before they could recover from their terror in time to draw a weapon the old hunter's iron right fist and heavy knife had sent them to earth, and the next moment Harry Dudley and the Boy Ranger were free.

Here let us drop the curtain over the scene that followed.

Ten minutes later, Old Hurricane, followed by the young surveyor, the Boy Ranger, and the two fair maidens—the latter mounted upon the youth's horse—were making their way eastward through the forest.

And still ten minutes later, Abel Mobile, with two led horses, rode into the circle of light beneath the spreading branches of the Two Oaks.

"Gone!" exclaimed the ruffian, with a chuckle of satisfaction; "but I see they've stretched the gal-thieves in good order, and oh! sweet glory! if Old Hurricane was only hanging there too—Furies!"

As he had entered the radius of light, he had caught sight of two persons hanging from a limb of one of the oaks, and the first impression was, of course, that Thoms and his companions had hung the young ranger and surveyor, and they had pushed on; but a second glance told him that the two bodies hanging between heaven and earth were those of his red allies—Indians!

And a quick glance around him discovered to him the body of the outlaw, Jack Hupp, lying where it had fallen under the fatal blow of Old Hurricane.

Filled with a sudden terror, the outlaw turned his animal's head, and galloped away into the then inviting shadows of the woods, pursued by the phantom of vengeance.

CHAPTER XIII.

OUR FLAG IS THERE!

We pass over a period of three days and again take up the thread of our story.

In a little valley, compassed on three sides by tall, wooded bluffs, and on the fourth side by the Des Moines river, the claim-stakers had erected a little defense, which, after the spirit of their forefathers, they named Fort Defiance. The topographical location of the defense had been well considered in view of the natural advantages it afforded. The valley was treeless and shrubless, and unbroken by hills or depressions on its surface. It was of about thirty acres in extent, and shaped like a crescent, the river defining the face or straight line.

A little stream found its way across the plain and poured its waters into the river. It was one of those remarkable streams frequently met with upon the prairies of the West, resembling more an artificial channel than a natural creek; and there was nothing in the appearance of the banks to indicate the presence of a stream any distance away. When you did stand upon the banks, however, you would only see a narrow channel, filled with water, and almost concealed by the tall grass on each side intermingling over it. But, by actual measurement this stream would be found to be from two to six feet deep.

The claim-stakers had, with a view to an ample supply of water, erected their little fort, so that this creek, traversing the plain, flowed directly through the inclosure, the basement of the latter resting almost upon the water's surface.

The little defense had been constructed over the creek about five rods from the river. The logs with which it was built had been drawn from the woods across the plain with the mule teams belonging to the party. Some stones were used in its construction, and every side had been well provided with loops and other means to insure a vigorous defense and certain victory should they be attacked.

In one corner of the fort a separate apartment had been made for the accommodation of Dora and Dolly, whom Old Hurricane had placed under the protection of the little band, they having reached the

camp of the claim-stakers in safety on that same eventful night which had witnessed the drama at the Two Oaks.

The whole band seemed highly delighted with this new addition to their number; for, while those two fair and innocent girls would add to their responsibilities, their presence inspired all with a spirit of chivalrous devotion, and strengthened their courage and resolution.

During the construction of the fort, Wild Dick, the Dumb Spy, had kept the Indians and robbers away by artifice, so skillfully played that his purposes were never suspected. In the meantime he had kept his friends posted as to the movements of the enemy.

On the second night after the completion of the fort, Dick made his appearance there, with information that put the claim-stakers in a state of great uneasiness.

"The devil's to pay, Cap," he said, in reply to a question from Ross Grove; "the robbers and redskins have disordered your fort, and they're burnin' with rage and vengeance. Old Black Hawk can't do anything with his rebellious warriors—the robbers hev got the upper hand of him—and thar's a plot on foot to assassinate the chief. They're goin' to attack the fort, and they've sent me out to make a reconnaissance—me, ha! ha! ha!"

"How soon do they propose to make the attack?"

"Not afore to-morrow night. Then look out, boys, fur they're in 'arnest. Ole Abe Mobile has found out his gals, as he calls 'em, are here, and him and Cale Thoms swear they'll bring down the heavens but what they'll have 'em; and you, Hurricane—why, they've been figurin' three days as how they'd punish you fur your interference at the Two Oaks."

"Hol' ho! ho!" roared Old Hurricane. "I s'pect they are a leetle frothy, but, when they git 'em girls, it'll be when this old carcass is cold. By heavens, them girls are wuth fightin' fur—they inspire me with strength and courage big as a mountain, and I could fight fur them little critters as I could for my own glorious country!"

"True! true, Hurricane! and here's with you," shouted a number of the brave, stalwart Kentuckians.

"What else have you to report, Dick?" asked Ross Grove.

"Wal, the robbers are havin' a good deal of trouble," said Dick, "fur, besides you fellers, Scarlet Death is pepperin' a few of their men."

At mention of this name a perceptible movement agitated the party, for they had all witnessed enough of that mysterious Demon's work to fill them with no little wonder and fear, bordering on superstition.

"Have they any idea who or what the Demon is?" asked Harry Dudley.

"Not in the least. Howsumever, they think he can be destroyed, and big efforts are bein' made to that effect."

"Bah!" exclaimed Noisy Nat, "they mout as well try to hold a shadder or catch a spirit, fur I believe—and I'm not superstitious, boys, not by a long shot—I believe the Demon's an invisible avengin' angel, put here by the will o' Heaven."

"Wal, not changin' the subject, boys," said Dick, "I've sumthin' else to tell you. I've found the treasure-house of the outlaws."

"Indeed?"

"Yas, and it's not over a mile from here."

"Anything in it?"

"It's chock full o' boxes, big and little, filled with everything imaginable. I tell ye them Disputers are a tough set o' larks, and carry on their piracy on a wholesale scale. I've learned that Reckless Rob, the robber chief, owns a leetle stern-wheel steamer on the Missisip' that plies atwixt St. Louey and Bloomfield as an honest craft, but the fact is, whenever that steamer gits a cargo o' valuable goods, the river pirates stops the boat and boards it, and, after taking all they can find with takin', they let the boat go on, and the pirates hussel the goods right up here to their secret cave. Don't you see into that river piracy business that's defied the powers so long?"

"It looks a leetle probable," said Hurricane.

"Yas, and we may reap a double reward from our adventures yet," said Captain Ross Grove.

"That's true, Cap," said Dick, "and as the enemy are likely to lay siege to your fort, I'd advise you to lay in a supply of ammunition from their store while you can."

"Have they ammunition concealed in the cavern of which you speak?"

"Yas, everything, Cap, everything from beginnin' to end; includin' silk goods, rich carpets, silverware and jewelry wuth thousands and thousands."

"Yas, we ought to have, and I think will have a supply of ammunition," said Ross Grove, "and if the girls are in need of anything in the way of clothing, they shall have it. It's true the goods are no more ours than the outlaws', but necessity will obligate the confiscation, and it may be a partial help toward bringing those robbers to justice."

"That's the gospel, John," said Old Hurricane, "and you app'int a party to go after the things, and be sure and app'int me one of them, for I'm good on toin' things—ekal to a mule."

"Very well, I'll appoint you for one; now select your own crowd and go for the treasure cave," said Ross Grove.

"Wal, this is conferrin' undeserved honors on me, Cap; but I'll fist name Wild Dick, the Boy Ranger, and Harry Dudley to go with me, and the rest of you can defend the fort and them little angels."

The matter being thus settled, the four took their departure from the fort, Wild Dick leading the way.

An hour later found them in the secret cavern, among the stolen goods of the outlaws. A light being prepared, it revealed to their eyes a promiscuous heap of boxes, bundles, barrels, and kegs.

Placing one of their number on guard at the en-

trance of the cave, the others proceeded to examine the contents of the boxes. Old Hurricane, anxious for Dolly and Dora's comfort, secured a large quantity of such things as he thought could be made useful by them in furnishing their wardrobe and apartments. The others secured a goodly quantity of ammunition, and then, having concealed all traces of their work as well as they could, they took their departure for the fort.

Arrived there in safety, Old Hurricane was admitted to Dora and Dolly's room with the goods he had brought for them. Depositing the bundle on the floor, he said:

"There, children, are some fix-ups for you."

"Thank you, Uncle Hurricane, for being so considerate of our comfort," said Dora, as the old borderman left the room.

The maidens' womanly curiosity to know what the bundle contained was at once aroused, and they proceeded to open it.

The first thing that met their eyes was a roll of rich carpeting, over which they had a hearty laugh as they compared it with their surroundings. They found, also, some rolls of various-colored silks, some woollen and cotton fabrics, needles, thread, combs, and even some fancy jewelry.

"I declare, Dora," said the vivacious little Dolly, with a merry laugh, "Uncle Hurricane has been quite considerate of our welfare and comfort."

"Yas, so far as silks are concerned, although they will be of no use whatever to us."

"Why, yes they will, Dora. I was just wishing for something of the kind. You see, we have a part to perform in the defense of Fort Defiance. We are all a little band of American patriots, and yet we have nothing by which a foe might know under what flag we are fighting."

"Oh, Dolly, you little chit! I see what you are driving at now. I would never have thought of such a thing. So let's do it. We have everything here that would be desired to accomplish the object, and then it will be such a pleasant surprise to the men."

"But we will have to let one or two into our secret," said Dolly.

"Yas; let it be the two that stand guard to-morrow night."

"Very well, sweet sister; but we can begin our work at once," said Dolly, and thus we will leave them for the time being.

After having imparted all the information of which he was possessed concerning the robbers, Wild Dick took his departure for Spain.

Sentinels had been posted soon after nightfall, but the night passed quietly away.

All were astir early the following morning, and the day was passed in strengthening the little fort for the attack threatened the coming night.

During the day the maidens learned from Captain Ross Grove that Old Hurricane and Harry Dudley would stand guard the coming night, and so they embraced the first opportunity of letting them into their little secret. The old borderman was greatly taken with the spirit of the fair girls' enterprise, and pledged his assistance to them in carrying it out.

The day wore away, and the shadows of night again infolded the valley. The sentinels took their post, while the others retired to their quarters to rest and sleep. Wild Dick was to be on the alert and give them a signal an hour before the attack on the fort was to be made. This gave the claim-stakers ease of mind, as they would have ample time to get ready for the foe after Dick's notice was given.

The forepart of the night was dark and still. There was no wind, nothing to break the silence of the hour, save the soft ripple of the little stream flowing through the fort. The little valley seemed inclosed by a black wall of darkness. The tall trees on the eastern shore of the river reared their dark heads high athwart the sky, while the wooded bluffs to the westward frowned darkly down upon the little plain below.

As the hours wore away, the moon came up, flooding the landscape with its mellow radiance; but dark clouds that were floating across the face of the heavens crossed its disk ever and anon, making checkers of light and shadow on the earth.

The men in their shelter slept soundly, all unconscious of what was going on around them. However, as the hours wore on, they were all suddenly startled from their slumber by the sound of voices.

"What's up?" questioned Captain Ross Grove, starting from his sleep.

"Hark! Listen, captain. Some one is singing—it's the girls; Dora and Dolly, and other voices accompany them—it's the voices of Old Hurricane and Harry Dudley. Hark!"

They sat still, apparently enraptured by the sweet seductive notes as they thrilled out in melodious strains upon the air, and every one bent his ear to catch the words:

"Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light,

What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,

Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,

O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming," etc.

As if actuated by a single impulse, the men sprang from their couches and rushed out to where the singers were standing. A light breeze fanned their cheeks as they entered the open court, and something like the soft rustle of a great wing above them fell upon their ears. They lifted their eyes upward, and just then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and showed them a beautiful flag—the stars and stripes—floating gracefully out in rip-

pling folds from a tall pole around which the singers stood.

And this was the maidens' surprise—made by their own hands of the silks brought by Hurricane from the robbers' treasure cave.

The sight of the dear old flag was magical. It stirred within the breasts of the little band that enthusiasm and patriotic devotion which a nation's banner is wont to stir in loyal hearts.

"Well done, Dora and Dolly! You have performed a noble part; you have infused new life into the little band of heroes, and nerved them for the ordeal so soon to come."

The last words had scarcely died upon the singers' lips when there arose a sound—

"As if all the fiends from heaven that fell
Had pealed the banner-cries of hell."

It was the horrifying yell of the Indians and outlaws that had burst from the shadows along the base of the bluffs, and now came pouring in a living stream across the plain.

"Rouse, ye Romans!" cried Old Hurricane; "the demons are upon us!"

"To arms, boys!" shouted Ross-grove, "and fight like men for your lives!"

"Ay, ay, captain!" added the old hunter; "and by the gods of Olympus, yonder flag must not be disgraced, nor those whose fairy hands made it!—whoop! whoop! hurrah, ye screechin' fiends, come on—right into the jaws of death, and—"

The rest of the defiant words were lost in the thunderous crash of firearms that now rent the morning air in wild, startling echoes!

CHAPTER XIV. A STIRRING TIME.

FULLY a hundred Indians and robbers, led by the notorious Reckless Rob, had assaulted the little fort of the claim-stakers, and their great superiority of numbers was expected to insure an easy victory; so with yell and scream they came charging pell-mell across the plain. But a deadly fire was poured into their ranks from the loops of the little fort, causing them to recoil for a moment in consternation. The defiant, triumphant shout which went up from the lips of the assaulted garrison angered the robbers, and they rallied and again pressed upon the fort, only to recoil before another withering volley of the claim-stakers' rifles.

"To! ho! ho!" roared Old Hurricane; "scat, thar, you howlin' varlets, fur ye can't come it while the flag of the free floats over Fort Defiance. Whoop, hurrah!"

"If we can hold out as successful till daylight," said Ross-grove, "we will have no trouble in keeping them off."

"True, John," replied Hurricane; "but look a-here: what do you think's the reason Wild Dick didn't give the agreed-on signal?"

"Circumstances over which I had no control," said a voice behind them, and turning, they stood face to face with Wild Dick.

"By cracky!" exclaimed Hurricane; "where'd you come from, man?"

"And who let you into the fort?" asked Ross-grove.

"I waded this creek to the walls o' the fort, then I dived under the wall and come up on the inside; and you'll have to look sharp or the red-skins will avail themselves o' the same means to git inside o' your citadel."

"That's all very true, Dick," said Ross-grove, "and we will not forget to keep a watch out for such danger hereafter—ah! here they come again! To your posts, boys, to your posts!"

The enemy had formed under the shadows of the bluffs, and having scattered out over the plain, came charging down upon the little fortification again.

A deadly fire met them, but with less effect than usual, for they were so scattered that they did not feel the shock so severely, and the left wing of the foe coming on, succeeded in getting under the outer walls of the fort.

Great danger now threatened the besieged, for should the enemy force a breach in the wall, they could easily, with their odds, carry all before them.

A triumphant yell went up from the savages' lips when they had gained this position of advantage, for they knew the claim-stakers could not, without exposing themselves, depress the muzzles of their rifles sufficiently to bring them in range.

A lull in the battle now ensued. Old Hurricane took advantage of it to open a conversation with the foe on the outside.

"Hullo, red-skins, out thar," he called; "what's the prospect fur scalps?"

"Good!" was the laconic reply of a savage.

Old Hurricane was somewhat nonplused by the reply, but determined to show a bold front, he responded:

"Wal, thar's some fine 'uns in here, red-skins, but you'll have to fight fur 'em."

"Can do that," replied the savage mouthpiece.

At this juncture a movement was heard without, and our friends soon discovered the foe were endeavoring to scale the wall. This, however, they (the foe) found would be more difficult than they had anticipated, for the walls were higher than they appeared from a distance.

The claim-stakers had expected such an emergency, and were prepared to meet it. They had laid in a supply of large stones, and they at once began dropping these over the parapet on the heads of the foe, causing quite a commotion among them. In fact, this movement hastened affairs among the enemy, who at once began a determined effort to scale the wall. One savage or robber, as the case might be, would hoist a comrade on his shoulder, and by

this means the latter was enabled to reach the top of the parapet, only to be beaten back by the claim-stakers. A few gained the interior of the fort, but were instantly shot down and hurled over among their friends, who finally gave up their attempts, and beat a retreat for safer quarters.

Daylight at last dawned, and from the distant bluffs the defeated robbers and red-skins saw the flag of the claim-takers floating proudly and gracefully in the morning air, and the triumphant defenders moving to and fro within the walls of their fortifications.

Wild Dick remained with his friends until after daylight, and when on the eve of taking his departure, Captain Ross-grove plucked him aside, and said:

"Dick, I have a little favor to ask of you."

"Name it, captain, name it."

Ross-grove drew from his pocket a picture, and handing it to Dick, said:

"Take a good look at that, and when you return from the Dispute, tell me whether you have seen a woman there, either a captive or free, that looks like that picture."

"I'll do it, Cap, with all my heart," said Dick, "but I swear that's an awful purty face in this picter. Is she any relation to you, Cap?"

"No difference, Dick, no difference now. I will tell you all about it when you report to me my discovery."

"All hunky, Cap," responded Dick.

At this juncture the latter's brother, Witless Seth, made his appearance, and with his fingers began a conversation. For several minutes they conversed in their silent language, the violent gesticulations of the mute betraying great emotion.

At length Wild Dick took his departure for Spain on his mission in behalf of Captain Ross-grove.

The day wore slowly away. The defeat of the foe did not give the claim-stakers entire ease of mind, for they knew they would resort to some new demonstration to dislodge them. Not a sign of the enemy was seen during the day, but toward evening a sound like the ring of an ax came from over among the wooded hills.

"Some one's choppin' over thar, captain," said Old Hurricane, with an ominous shake of the head. "The cunnin' varlets have somethin' new in their heads; what it can be, I can't say. If it war safe to do so, I'd make a little scout thereways, but no doubt a hundred pair of eyes are watchin' out fur just such an emergency as me. But I'm afraid they're fixin' up somethin' to give us trouble to-night. But let 'em come; if they want fire and brim-stun, let 'em come!"

Night again unfolded the land. The sky was clear, and although the moon was not up, the starlight rendered objects quite distinct.

Old Hurricane, under cover of the darkness, made a reconnaissance along the extremities of the plain. He found a number of Indians and robbers camped to the south of the fort, and from their presence there, and the activity that prevailed among them, it was quite evident that they intended another attack on Fort Defiance.

Returning to the fort, the scout reported his discoveries, and suggested every measure of defense practicable.

Inasmuch as they expected an early attack, the claim-stakers did not retire, but patrolled the fort, rifles in hand.

Noisy Nat and Ethan Hamilton were posted as sentinels, although all were on the watch. Even Witless Seth, the mute, seemed to have had his fears aroused by something more than usual, and at any time he could be seen flitting hither and thither through the fort like a shadow.

Suddenly, with his face betraying the wildest fear and excitement, he rushed up to where Captain Ross-grove and Old Hurricane stood conversing, and began gesticulating in a quick, violent manner. The old hunter and his companion failing to comprehend his wants, made a movement signifying their readiness to follow him.

The mute hastily led the way across the inclosure, and on the edge of the little stream that found its way directly through the fort, he stopped. Then, with a quick movement of the hand, he pointed down at the water.

Bending their gaze in the direction thus indicated, they were not a little surprised to see a long bass-wood log lying upon the surface of the stream. It had been recently placed there—since dark, in fact, and judging from its exterior appearance it was hollow.

How it had come there was a profound mystery to the captain. He knew it could not have drifted under the lower edge of the fort, for had there even been space enough between the lower log and the water's surface, there was not sufficient current to carry the log there.

Seeing Old Hurricane betrayed some silent emotions at sight of the mysterious log, he—the captain—was on the eve of speaking to him, when the hunter turned, and drawing him aside, said, in a low tone:

"John, thar's mischief brewin'."

"Why do you think so?" asked the captain.

"That log in the channel yonder has been forced under the lower side of the fort by some human agency. It never drifted in here. You remember we heard a choppin' goin' on over 'mong the bluffs to-day? Now, that log, and the Lord only knows how many more, is what they war cuttin'. You see, John, that log is holler as a shell, and I opine thar's holes cut on the under side of the log, and if so, my ha' on't, thar's an 'Luzin' head in every hole."

"What! Indians in that log?"

"Thar heads are, while their bodies are under the log in the water."

"If such is the case, there can't possibly be very many savages there."

"No, but they're waitin' fur another logful to come. That's only my 'pinion, John, fur it's an ole trick of the red-skins, that maskin' thar heads in holler logs and their bodies under the water. I've see'd it afore, John."

"Well, I shall hasten to call the attention of the boys to the fact, and have them prepared for the worst."

"Do so, John, and I'll look to other things."

The two separated. Hurricane went to the west side of the fort where the creek entered the inclosure. To his surprise, he found Witless Seth there, busily engaged in filling up the channel with large stones that had been gathered into the fort for other purposes. His proceedings met the approval of the old hunter, who at once lent his assistance to the work; and they soon had the channel blocked so that no further entrances could be made from this point.

When this was accomplished, the old hunter went back and found Ross-grove and his men drawn up in line, ready to receive the cunning foe.

"I'll tell you, John," said the borderman, addressing Ross-grove in a whisper; "if thar's any 'Luzins in that log, they're waitin' fur friends to jine 'em. But they'll not do it in a holler log, fur the mute and me blockaded the channel. So we've got the gentry in a trap, instead of them trappin' us. And now fur some fun, boys, and perlience a leetle fightin' throwed in. I'm goin' to flip one end of that log outen the water, and see what's under it. You fellers all be red-dy to spot your man, in case my suspicions are correct."

As he concluded, the old hunter turned and advanced to the edge of the creek. Then, stooping over, he caught hold of one end of the mysterious log and raised it quickly from the water. Simultaneous with this act, a dozen rifles were raised to as many shoulders.

"A water-haul, by the gods of Olympus!" burst in tones of apparent disappointment from the hunter's lips, as he dropped the log back in the water. Not the sign of a savage was seen, although there were a number of large holes freshly cut on the under side of the log.

"I can't see into it, John," the hunter said, not a little perplexed; "that log never came here of its own accord, never. Thar's not current enuff to float it. It's true, the water from the bluffs to the river is deep enuff to float an ark, but then if the current had carried it down, it would have lodged against the fort on the outside. It'd never had the power to dive under the wall of the fort like somethin' possessed of reason. No sree, boys, some human agency has put that log inside of this inclosure. It may have been some trick jist to test our vigilance, for the cunnin' devils are as ticky as Satan hisself."

"They may have entered the fort by means of the log, as you suspected at first, and have crept out and concealed themselves among the shadows within the fort," said Ross-grove.

"Hardly possible, cap, yet it might not be amiss with the caution of a borderman to search the premises."

"Then, boys," said Ross-grove to his friends, "search every nook and shadow for concealed foes."

The men turned away and began the search. Hurricane and Ross-grove still maintained their position by the creek, conversing in a subdued tone.

At length a deep silence was imposed upon them by a sound like that which would be produced by a person drumming on a log with his fingers. It seemed to issue from the water at one end of the strange log. It lasted for only a moment, then there was an interval of silence, immediately succeeded by the same sound, which seemed to pass quickly from one end of the log to the other, then cease again.

"I swear to gracions, John!" exclaimed Old Hurricane, "that noise is in that infernal log. It must be haunted, John, for didn't I lift one end clear outen the water? And didn't I see the holes on the under side whar 'Luzin' heads had ort to have been? Didn't I see all this, John, plain as I see you?"

"Perhaps, Hurricane," said Ross-grove, "the moment you took hold of the log, the cunning knaves divined your intention, or overheard our conversation, and drawing their heads from those holes, dove under the water, where they remained until you dropped the log back. You know they say an Indian can live quite a while under water, and it was scarcely half a minute from the time you lifted the log from the water till you dropped it again, just as it was, and during the noise consequent upon the fall of the log, the savages may have resumed their cunning covert."

"My God, John! Why, in Heaven's name, didn't you speak your mind afore this? It's impossible for one mind to conceive every thing, and your views of this is—"

He did not finish the sentence. There was a shrill rap upon the mysterious log, succeeded by a fluttering in the water under it. A dozen heads, followed by naked, bronzed shoulders and nude forms, appeared above the grassy borders of the channel, with a scream that thrilled in startling echoes upon the air; a dozen powerful savages leaped from the creek and sprang, with the fury of demons, toward our friends. And foremost among them was that implacable enemy and rival of Old Hurricane, the giant warrior, Big-Foot!

CHAPTER XV.

"CHECK BY JOWL."

As the savages arose from the creek, their yells warned the claim-stakers of their peril, and, although taken by surprise, their actions of defense were made as promptly as though they had been expecting this very movement of the foe. Almost instantly a dozen

rifles poured their deadly contents into the ranks of the savages, laying several of their number dead. But with wild impetuosity, the survivors pressed to the conflict, with that desperation of men who know they must win or die. They were armed with but a single weapon—the deadly tomahawk. These they dare not throw, through a fear of their inability to recover them in the dark, and so they were compelled to press close upon the whites to engage them. But the latter readily saw where their danger lay, and averted the blows intended for their heads by a rapid retreat, in the meantime firing with their pistols—when their rifles had been emptied—upon the advancing foe.

Old Hurricane had no sooner discovered the presence of his giant foe, Big-Foot, than he prepared to meet him.

Big-Foot, laboring under the impression that he had slain the old hunter and secured his scalp several evenings previous, was entirely ignorant of the foe with which he had to deal, until Hurricane, by a dexterous sweep of his heavy rifle, had knocked his tomahawk whirling from his hand and uttered his peculiar war-cry, causing him to recoil with momentary surprise and fear.

"So, ho! my big beauty, we've met agin!" the old hunter cried; then, with a leap, like that of a tiger, he sprang at the savage, planting his huge fist between his eyes with such terrific force that the red-skin went down like a log. But, quick as a flash he was upon his feet and grappling hand-to-hand with his adversary.

And now began a struggle that baffles description, for their movements were so swift and violent, and their positions shifted so rapidly, that the eye could not follow them. Away across the arena they whirled and spun like a pair of giddy waltzers, neither uttering a sound, but struggling in that deadly silence which both had maintained in their conflict of a few nights previous.

Neither commanded a weapon, save those that nature had given them, consequently it was a trial of sheer strength and endurance, in which they were well matched. It is true, the savage had some advantage in the suppleness of youth, but this was neutralized by the white man's skill as a wrestler.

Meanwhile, the conflict in another part of the fort had assumed a far different character. The claim-stakers had routed the savages, who were running hither and thither like frightened deer, endeavoring to find an egress from the fort.

This decided the conflict between the two giants. Big-Foot caught sight of his defeated and fleeing friends, and his own fears at once became aroused. He knew assistance would soon come to the hunter, and, in all probability, cut off all chances of escape. There was no alternative but to seek safety in flight, and settle the deadly feud between him and the old hunter at another time. So, throwing every energy into the effort, he tore himself from the clutches of his antagonist, and, with a defiant shout, bounded away across the fort.

Old Hurricane gave chase at a speed that threatened the recapture of the savage. The latter, however, reached the wall of the fort, and, bounding up a rude pair of stone steps, that had been constructed for the use of the sentinels, he glanced back over his shoulder like a stag at bay, then uttered a defiant yell and made a desperate leap over the parapet for the ground on the outside. But, just as he was sinking to a level with the top of the wall, Old Hurricane, who was literally at the Indian's heels, reached forward and grasped the savage by the scalp-lock. The weight of the descending giant proved too much for the hunter, who was thrown off his balance and jerked headlong over the top of the wall, to fall upon the red-skin.

Seeing this mishap of the hunter, the men hastened to his assistance. As they threw open their ports, they were not a little surprised to see a number of savages rush up from behind the river-bank, toward the two struggling foes.

"Quick, boys, fire upon them," cried Ross-grove, "or our friend will be slain!"

The men quickly fired upon the advancing foes, causing them to fall back behind the shelter of the river-bank.

The claim-stakers now endeavored to get outside to the assistance of the hunter, but a random broadside from the enemy intrenched behind the river-bank warned them to keep within their breast-works.

"By heavens, boys, we're in a dilemma!" cried young Kendall, the Boy Ranger; "we dare not go out to the assistance of our friend, but, in the meantime, we have the consolation of knowing the red-skins dare not venture out to help their friend. So Hurricane and Big-Foot for it, and I'll bet on the hunter."

All relapsed into silence and listened. They could hear the two giants struggling at the foot of the wall on the outside, but they no longer fought in silence. Dull sodden blows, cries, yells and execrations filled the air. These gradually grew feebler and fainter, until, at length, all sounds of the struggle were hushed. The conflict had ended; who was the victor?

The claim-stakers peered out at the loopholes. They saw two dark forms lying in the grass about ten feet apart, but they were motionless.

"Boys, they have slain each other," said one of the party.

A sigh of bitter regret escaped each lip, for during their sojourn together, all had become greatly attached to the great, kind-hearted hunter.

Ross-grove, however, thinking he might have only been wounded, called to him by name. But there was no response—no movement of either of the motionless forms.

A moment later Dora and Dolly came running with affright, to where the party stood.

"Oh!" cried Dolly, "the hunter, Noisy Nat, is dying out yonder!"

Each one noticed now, for the first time, that Nat was missing.

"Come, one of you, and let's us look to Nat. The others remain here and watch that the savages behind the bank do not approach and scalp our friend Hurricane."

Ross-grove and young Kendall were conducted by the maidens to where Noisy Nat had fallen under the blow of a savage. The captain soon discovered, to his great joy, that the hunter had only been stricken unconscious, and even then showed signs of returning life.

Dora and Dolly had procured a lantern, and, like angels of mercy, lent their assistance in restoring the borderman to life.

As soon as Nat was able to speak, he started up, and gazing around him like one bewildered, exclaimed:

"Where is it?—where is that—that—"

"That what, Nat?" asked Ross-grove.

"That Demon, Scarlet Death!"

"Your mind is confused, Nat. There has been no Demon about, unless you mean the Indians, which is nearly the same."

"No, captain," persisted the hunter; "I know what I'm talkin' about. 'I did see a Demon. I see'd him leap into the fort. I see'd his horns and cloven hoofs—yes, I know it was Scarlet Death. I see'd him open his mouth and balls of fire shoot out among the red-skins. I know it was the Demon, and I know you can find his mark on some o' them dead Injuns. Go look, captain, just go look for my satisfaction.'"

"I'll do so, Nat," replied the captain, turning away with a smile on his face, and taking the lantern from Dora's hand, he moved away toward the bodies of the slain savages. "Yes," he mused, "Nat is out of his head; the savage gave him a pretty heavy jolt on the head, filling his mind with visions of demons and dragons. However, to satisfy him I'll examine these dead warriors, for the Demon's mark."

He came to where five of the savages had fallen near each other. He held the lantern down so that its rays streamed across one of their faces. He started, and a cry of surprise burst from his lips. Upon the temple of the warrior he saw the death-mark of the terrible and mysterious Scarlet Death!

"By heaven! Nat is right; here is the Demon's mark, as I live!"

"I told you I weren't outen my head, captain."

Ross-grove turned at the sound of the voice. Nat had risen to his feet and followed him.

"Ay, you are better, Nat, the captain said, a little confused; 'but see here; did you actually see what you just described to me?'"

"I did, captain, help me Bob Crusoe. I'm sure I see'd just what I told you I did."

"But what became of the Demon after the fight?" said the captain, growing more and more confused and mystified.

"I don't know, captain. I got that jolt on the head that sent me flukin' to taw 'bout the time the Demon fust made its appearance."

"This is a little strange—yes, mysterious. Were it not for the Demon's mark before my eyes, I would believe you received that blow on the head a second before the Demon appeared, or why would not some of the rest have seen the same?"

"Can't say, captain, but it's a gospel fact. I, Nathaniel Taylor, did see the Demon of the Des Moines, and I'm the fust that ever sot eyes onto it."

The two proceeded to examine the rest of the slain warriors. There were seven of them in all, and of these, two had fallen under the deadly hand of the mysterious Scarlet Death, for there were no other wounds to be found upon them.

They next searched for the tracks of the Demon, but the ground being covered with a mat of trodden grass, no impressions were left upon it.

There was something decidedly strange about this mysterious avenger. Captain Ross-grove's mind was entirely free of superstitious bias, yet, here was something well calculated to engender mystery and wonder in the most skeptical mind.

However much the captain's mind may have been worked up by the mystery, all soon became forgotten in the interest centered on the fate of Old Hurricane, for while most of the men believed that he was dead, others declared that they had seen him move, and averred that the distance between his body and that of Big-Foot was growing shorter. If such was the case, it was evident that both of the giants were alive, yet feigning death, probably to mislead each other into some rash act that would terminate fatally. And again, if this were true, their present silent inactivity had been brought about by total exhaustion.

As the hours dragged wearily by, the moon finally came up. From the port-holes our friends now gazed out. They saw the body of Old Hurricane and that of Big-Foot lying upon the earth apparently stark and stiff. But it was readily seen that the distance intervening between their bodies was not half so great as when they were first discovered! The foes were gradually approaching each other. There was no doubt of this, and Ross-grove had decided to fire at the body of Big-Foot, when Witless Seth, who had been gazing out at one of the port-holes, beckoned him to his side, and motioned to look out of the loop in a certain direction.

The captain complied with the mute's request, and he was not a little surprised to see a large, fine-looking horse, with bridle and saddle upon it, coming directly from the west in a course that would leave the fort scarcely a rod to the north. No one was

visible about it, but it was quite evident that its movements were directed by the impulse of an invisible rider.

Captain Ross-grove was at quite a loss to know the meaning of the animal's appearance there, and so he called Noisy Nat for counsel.

After the hunter had taken a careful survey of the animal and its surroundings, he said:

"By Jehokey, Cap, I see thro' part o' it, ennyhow. Thar's an Injun or robber on that hoss, layin' up like a tick ag'in the further side; and now, mind ye, he's up to some deviltry with his cunnin'—mebbe jist reconnoiterin' the situation."

"Then let us watch his movements," said Ross-grove, and put a bullet through him if possible."

The horse came on with cautious step, and head erect, as if he scented danger. He was moving directly toward the motionless figures of Old Hurricane and Big-Foot, and at sight of them he shied slightly, bringing his cunning rider in plain view; but before our friends could fire, the horse had been reined back into its former course and urged forward.

It was finally permitted to stop directly between the bodies of the two giant foes, and then our friends saw the cunning rider slip to the ground.

"I see into it, now," said Noisy Nat; "that infernal booger has come to help Big-Foot away, or else to get Hurricane's scalp— Ah! looky, Cap, they must think we're a pack o' condemned fools!"

The last remark was induced by seeing Big-Foot move, so they knew he was only wounded, and by some means or other it had become known to his friends, who had conceived the idea of sending the horse there to help him away.

Our friends kept a close watch on the savage giant. All of a sudden they saw him leap to his feet and prepare to spring upon the animal's back; and at the same instant they were not a little amazed to see Old Hurricane spring nimbly to his feet, and turn as if to mount the horse, also.

The two foes stood face to face with the animal between them. Their eyes met above the horse's back. Quick as the lightning's flash, the right hand of each shot across the saddle's seat and the fingers clasped with a fearful gripe in each other's long-coveted scalp-locks.

The Indian stooped quickly to break the hunter's hold—the hunter did the same. This movement threw their united weight upon the horse's back. Side by side their arms lay across the saddle-seat, their weight supported by the hair of the head.

A yell of vengeance burst from the savage's lips. It was answered by a shout of derision—emphasized by a tug at the Indian's hair—from the lips of Old Hurricane.

Their yells frightened the horse, and, with a wild snort, it whirled around and dashed away at a thunderous speed over the plain, the two deadly, relentless foes dangling, as it were, cheek by jowl, at his sides.

No effort of the frantic beast could break the petrified grasp of the deadly enemies—no effort could slide them off over his back, for their arms lay pressed in the deep saddle, and held there by their united weights.

In this manner they were dragged away into the gloom of the distance—away to an unknown fate!

CHAPTER XVII.

CAMILLA'S PRISON.

LET US now follow the Dumb Spy back to Spain again.

In accordance with his brother Seth's daily habits, Wild Dick lingered about in the woods until dark, then made his way into the settlement and to his quarters in the rear of the court-room.

The robbers, he knew, were all absent, so he threw himself upon his couch and endeavored to gain a few hours' sleep and rest that his over-worked body and mind stood in need of. He soon fell asleep, and slept soundly for hours, but he was at length awakened by the sound of voices in the adjoining apartment, and rising to a sitting posture, he applied his ear to the crack in the wall made for his especial eavesdropping purposes.

He heard the voices of Reckless Ralph and Cale Thoms in stormy rage. They had just returned from the vicinity of Fort Defiance, where they had sustained another defeat by the claim-stakers.

"I tell you, captain," he heard Thoms say, "we have got to call on the United States dragoons to drive them fellers off the Black-Hawk Purchase. You know, last summer, when them fellows from Illinois came on to the Purchase and made their claims, we reported them to the authorities. And what was the consequence? Why, a company of dragoons came on and drove them off and burnt their cabins."

"This case is different, Thoms," replied Reckless Ralph. "Ross-grove's party has old Black-Hawk's permit, on certain conditions, to locate claims on the Purchase, and so they couldn't be held amenable to the terms of the treaty. However, if our red allies succeed in assassinating Black-Hawk, the obstacle of his permit will be removed, and troops could be called to our assistance. But things have gone too far for such measures. These claim-stakers must never leave this country alive—not one of them; for they possess knowledge enough of Spain and its inhabitants to bring us to grief. Surely two hundred Indians and settlers can defeat a dozen stalwart Kentuckians without calling on an army! In fact, our safety depends on the secret extermination of the claim-stakers!"

"True, Judge, true," responded Thoms; "it's nothin' like havin' a long head, but I do want to pay some of them fellers for that affair at the Two Oaks, besides them girls of Abel Mobile's must be rescued, if taken dead!"

"You're growing desperate, Lieutenant," laughed the robber-chief, "and be careful that you don't run your head into the halter."

"Yes, Judge," retorted Thoms, "you can appreciate the old saying, that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. You're got your bird caged, and are easy."

Dick started slightly on hearing these last words. There was a latent meaning in them which he thought might develop into something tangible, so he listened intently to catch every word.

"Well, Thoms," he heard Reckless Ralph say, after a moment's pause, "we have got to make another attack on these fellows to-morrow night, and if we should fail again, we will have to unearth that old war-dog in Gibben's cellar, and try them with that. Roop says he believes there have been intruders in the treasure-vault. If so, these claim-lodgers may have found the cave, and if they're not put out of the way soon, they may bring dragons onto us, and the cave and its goods would be strong evidence against us. Yes, Thoms, we must exterminate the whole gang!"

"But, wouldn't the death of Rossgrove prove detrimental to your other plans?" questioned Thoms.

"Not in the least. The sooner he is dead the better, for should he once get wind of what I have in Spain, he'd bring down the heavens but what he would get her back."

"By cracky!" mused Wild Dick, when he had heard this, "then the original of the captain's picture is in Spain a prisoner! But, I do wonder what relation she is to the captain—and why she is here? I will know something about the whole matter," and he bent his head and listened.

"Suppose, Judge," he heard Thoms say, "you were to be questioned pretty closely about your prisoner by some one that doesn't understand the ropes?"

"Why, I'd tell them the truth, of course! I tell them she is my daughter who persisted in running away from the parental roof, and that I was compelled to lock her up."

"That tells the story," mused the Dumb Spy, "and by—"

At this juncture there came a hasty footstep into the court-room, and an excited voice exclaimed:

"Captain, captain, the guard at your daughter's prison-door is lying dead, and Scarlet Death, the Demon, has slain him!"

An oath burst from the profane lips of Reckless Ralph.

"Has she—my daughter I mean—escaped?"

"No—guess not, captain; her door's locked."

The robber-chief went storming out of the court-room, and took his way through the village, closely followed and watched by the Dumb Spy.

Raft soon came to the foot of a stairway leading up on the outside between two tall buildings. A number of persons were assembled there, wild with excitement and fear.

Reckless Ralph pushed boldly up the stairs, and at the top, true enough, he found the body of the man left there to guard the passage, lying dead, with the mark of Scarlet Death upon his temple. An exclamation burst from the outlaw's lips; then turning, he tried the door leading into the building on the right, and found it locked.

Descending the stairs, he ordered the body of the dead guard to be removed, and two others to take their post as watch at the head of the stairs.

A few minutes later the outlaw chief and his lieutenant were back in the court-room, and from his quarters, the Dumb Spy heard the following colloquy:

"Thoms, it does seem as though our days of glory were about over. What those claim-stakers don't do, Scarlet Death will. And that Demon is a mystery I'd give a great deal to have solved."

"Do you believe that's more than human agency connected with it, Judge?" asked Thoms.

"There must be, Thoms, or else we would have seen it ere this. But, whether the Demon is, or is not a supernatural being, it stands to reason from the recent death of Losh, that my daughter's imprisonment has been discovered."

"That sounds more like it, Judge. Like as any way there's some one lurking about to release her, and if it was my prisoner—my Dora Mobile—I'd place a guard on the inside of her room 'stead of the outside. Then, don't you see, a lurkin' foe couldn't slip up and knock him on the head, but would have to make his way into the room, and of course would make noise enough to put the guard in readiness to receive him."

"Well, really, Thoms, your being sober to-night for the first time in a fortnight enables you to display more than usual wit, for your idea of putting a guard on the inside of the room is a capital one; and I'll proceed to carry it into effect by placing Witless Seth there on guard."

"Witless Seth?" exclaimed Thoms; "why, that deaf and dumb thing wouldn't be my choice for a good guard."

"Well, he is mine, for these reasons: she can't converse with him, and with honeyed words and sweet smiles bribe him to release her; then his sense of feeling is so sensitive that a skulker couldn't touch the building without his feeling the vibratory shock, however slight. And another thing, Witless Seth can see in the dark like a cat. So he would really make a better guard than one who depends upon his hearing."

"Well, there are some advantages in him, I'll admit," said Thoms.

"So I'll summon the mute and instruct him at once," said Reckless Ralph, and he proceeded to the spy's room.

He found Dick fast asleep, but rousing him, he conducted him into the court-room, and raising his hand, said:

"Seth, my daughter, who persists in running away from home, is a prisoner in one of the secret rooms. I mistrust enemies are lurking about, who will endeavor to liberate her to-night, and I want you to stand guard to prevent it."

The Dumb Spy evinced some uneasiness, and at once replied:

"Captain, I'm afraid Scarlet Death will beat me down."

"You will not be exposed to the Demon, Seth, for I will lock you in the room with the prisoner. Then I want you to keep a sharp watch out for enemies. Watch the prisoner; you can tell by her actions whether she is expecting any one to assist her."

This proved a relief to the mute's assumed fears, and he at once announced his willingness to comply with the captain's request. So he was conducted to the two tall buildings where the victim of Scarlet Death had been found.

Ascending the stairs, the robber-chief unlocked and opened one of the doors, and entered the room, followed by the mute. The apartment was lighted with a tallow-dip, and Wild Dick ran his eyes hastily over the room, taking everything at a glance. And he could scarcely repress an exclamation when his eyes fell upon the figure of a woman, seated near a small window. She turned toward them as they entered, and the Dumb Spy saw at once that he stood face to face with the original of Captain Rossgrove's picture!

She was young and extremely handsome, with features of the Greek type, and a form of exquisite beauty. Her face was a little pale, and her eyes heavy and sad, for her spirit was almost crushed under her cruel imprisonment. A look of deep despondency clouded her face when she saw who her visitors were; and with a sigh she turned away, and gazed out of her barred window into the darkness.

"My dear madam," said Reckless Ralph, "the time will come when you will have to look on my coming with joy instead of scorn."

"Never, never, villain!" she replied, bitterly, and in a tone that awoke a feeling of sympathy in the heart of the Dumb Spy.

"Well, well, madam, time will tell all. At present I have reason to think you are expecting release from lurking friends. If so, let me tell you that you'll be sadly disappointed, for I propose to leave my dumb servant and spy in this room with you; and while there will be no danger of your bribing him, he will be pretty apt to shoot the first man he gets his eyes on, trying to converse with or to release you."

"Mebby so," thought Dick, and he turned his head to conceal the cloud that swept over his face.

The outlaw tarried a few minutes longer, instructing the guard, then he left the room and locked the door behind him.

When his footsteps descending the stairs had died away, the prisoner breathed an air of relief; but soon she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears, and wept and sobbed as though her heart was breaking. At length she grew calm and sunk into a sort of mental abstraction. Her thoughts must have turned upon her guard eventually, for they suddenly found expression in the involuntary exclamation:

"Oh, if this man could only speak!"

"I can, madam," said Dick, in a low whisper, causing the prisoner to start from her reverie and turn with surprise upon him.

"Did you speak?" she asked.

"I did, madam," Dick replied, "but speak low as possible, for they all think I'm as deaf as an adder and dumb as a wooden man; but, the fact of it is, I can hear as good as the best, and have mighty good use of my tongue. You see, I'm playin' a fine game on these Dispute fellers, and if they should hold a higher trump, my life'd pay the stakes. But now, madam, you're just the very person I'm lookin' for."

"You—you looking for me?" exclaimed the woman, a ray of hope beaming in her dark eyes.

"Edzactly," responded the hunter. "I'm a spy here in this settlement in behalf of a lot of fellers called claim-stakers. Not many hours ago one of them showed me a picture, and wanted me to find out whether the original was in this settlement as a prisoner, or free. You, madam, look orfully like that picture."

"Who was the person that showed you the picture?" she asked.

"Captain John Rossgrove."

A low cry of joy burst from the woman's lips, and dropping on her knees before the spy, she said, imploringly:

"Oh, kind stranger, tell me where John Rossgrove, my darling husband, is?"

"Now I'll swear," said Dick, somewhat surprised, "this beats me—you, Captain Rossgrove's wife! Well, the captain's not fur from here, and if all goes right, you will be with him afore long."

"Thank God for this!" burst from the lips of Camilla Rossgrove, for she, this fair prisoner was. As she resumed her seat:

"Did John, my husband, tell you what reason he had to think I was in this place?"

"No, he would tell me nothing."

"When will you see him again?"

"I can't say, edzactly. It will be before twenty-four hours, though. But rest assured you will be rescued from here, before long. You should be set at liberty this minute, but you see I'm locked in here too, and it would take a giant to burst that lock. Lordy, if Old Hurricane was in my place, Missus John, he'd tear that door down, take you in his arms and walk away with ease and pleasure. And now I'm goin' to manage it to git him in here too. Keep on the look-out for help, and of all you do, know me, when others are about, only as Witless Seth, the Dumb Spy."

"I understand you, kind sir, and I will endeavor to

observe your desire. When you see my husband, tell him of my situation."

"I will do that, Missus John, and the low-lifed villain that is keepin' you a prisoner here will pay dearly for his cursed meanness— Ah! hark! silence!"

The Dumb Spy drew a pistol.

A hasty footstep was heard bounding up the steps without. Then a key was placed in the lock and turned. The door was thrust violently open and Reckless Ralph burst into the room like a tornado.

"Oh, ho! by the shades of Satan!" he hissed. "I am not deaf nor a fool! I have heard voices in this room from the one below, and by—"

The rest of his words were drowned in the sharp crack of the pistol in the hand of the Dumb Spy!

CHAPTER XVII.

"A HORSEMAN! A HORSEMAN!"

"CAUGHT, I fear, by Jinkers!" exclaimed the Dumb Spy to himself, when he heard the robber chief at the door; but, drawing his pistol, he sprang to the window, and when the outlaw burst into the room, and upon his profane tirade, Dick thrust his arm out at the window and fired his pistol at an imaginary foe.

"What's up here, anyhow?" stormed the outlaw. "So you've been conversing with some one at the window, eh, my dear madam? Did you shoot him, Seth?" he asked, with nervous fingers, as the spy turned from the window toward him; "did you kill the villain, I ask?"

"No, captain," the spy answered, and a cloud of disappointment swept over his face.

"Did you see any one at the window?"

"Yes; a man with bearded face—a stranger," replied Dick, growing easier, for he saw that he was not mistrusted. From this he knew Raft had not caught the drift of their conversation. He had only heard their voices, and suspected that some one was concealed in the room, or else talking through the window to Camilla.

"You should have been more cautious and not let a soul converse with the prisoner," said Reckless Ralph, with a frown.

"I thought the woman was praying," replied Dick, considering duplicity, just then, highly justifiable; "she was on her knees and I saw her lips moving. But when I fell your footsteps coming, I looked around and saw the stranger at the window; but she can't fool me again, captain."

With an oath, Reckless Ralph turned upon Camilla, and said:

"If I have evidence of your holding a conversation with outsiders again, madam, I will have you locked in a place where there will be no chance of your being found."

Camilla made no reply to the villain, for fear she might utter some word that would betray her friend, the Dumb Spy; and after having cautioned the guard to be more careful, the tyrant, believing he had frightened her into submission, left the room.

A smile overspread the features of the Dumb Spy, which finally broke into a fit of suppressed laughter, as the outlaw's footsteps died away.

The fair prisoner and her guard now entered into another conversation, which, however, was carried on in whispers. At length, Camilla, at the earnest request of her companion, retired to her bedroom and sought repose on the couch that had been prepared there for her.

Dick placed his chair against the door of the prison-room, and, assuming a position of ease, went to sleep and slept till morning.

About sunrise he was dismissed from further service, as Camilla's guard, by Reckless Ralph. As soon as he had procured his breakfast, he wandered away westward into the woods, but as soon as he was out of sight of Spain, he bent his footsteps in the direction of Fort Defiance. Moving with all possible haste, he soon came in sight of the little post. He saw the flag floating lazily in the morning breeze, but not one of the defenders could be seen.

Carefully he crossed the opening and approached the fort. The gate was opened to admit him, and when he had made a general statement of the situation of affairs among the enemy, he took Captain Rossgrove aside and said:

"Captain, I've found your wife."

"My wife?" gasped the captain.

"Yes, captain, she's a prisoner at Spain. She was abducted and carried there by the robbers."

The captain groaned in spirit.

"Oh, God! I fear it will kill her!"

"No danger, Cap. She's gittin' on all right. I guarded her last night and had a long talk with her, and came danged nigh gettin' caught playin' the mute."

"Then you told her I was near?"

"Yes; and it done me good to see her eyes sparkle and roses gather on her cheeks. I tell you, Cap, you must be proud of sich a handsome woman."

"Oh, heavens, Dick! If you only knew the agony I have suffered the last week, you would know how fondly I love my wife. And if you will effect her release you shall have your own reward."

"Tut, tut, Cap; the honors I'm reapin' as Witless Seth, the Dumb Spy, more than repays me for all I do. Then I'm goin' to make the information I possess of them outlaws' doin's pay me somethin'. However, I've got a plan laid for the rescue of your wife, if Old Hurricane will lend a helpin' hand."

"Then, Dick, I fear she will never be released, for I expect Hurricane is dead."

"Dead?" exclaimed the hunter. "Hurricane dead?"

Rossgrove briefly narrated the adventures of the previous night, and the sudden and fearful departure of Old Hurricane and Big-Foot on the back of the frightened horse.

"Whew!" exclaimed Dick, when the captain had concluded, "that was a ticklish situation, but, if either of them comes out clear with a sound scalp, it'll be Old Hurricane, my mind."

"I hope so, Dick, if my wife's rescue depends on his assistance."

"No, no, captain. It don't depend on him. That's Noisy Nat—he can help me but I thought Hurricane, being a dozen common men in one, would be the best I could select. For that matter, I know every man here would follow me to Spain. But it'd do no good, captain. The outlaws are too strong to effect anything by force. All will have to be done by stratagem. But rest assured, captain, your wife shall be rescued."

"I thank you, thank you, Dick, for this assurance, and may God aid you in your work."

"A horseman! A horseman!"

The cry rang suddenly out from the lips of the sentinel. The attention of every one within the fort was at once directed to a horseman approaching across the plain from the woods. He was riding at a furious speed, and shouting in a wild, defiant tone, at the same time waving something above his head in an excited, furious manner.

"What did I tell you, captain?" Wild Dick suddenly exclaimed. "That he comes now—that's him—Old Hurricane!"

A shout of joy burst from the claim-stakers' lips, for, by this time, the horseman had come near enough for all to see that Dick was right. It was Old Hurricane. He was riding the identical horse upon which he and Big-Foot had been carried away, and the object that he was swinging above his head was an Indian's scalp!

One of the party hastened and opened the gate, and a minute later the hunter rode into the little fort, amid the wildest shouts of joy. His face was scarcely recognizable, it being bruised and swollen from many ugly wounds and blows.

"Ho, boys!" burst from his lips as he drew rein in the inclosure. "I see you and them girls are all safe and sound! And you must excuse me, friends, for my hasty departure last night. I war wanted across the plain yonder, and didn't take time to tell you whar I war goin'."

"Yes, Hurricane, we saw you and Big-Foot ride away in a hurry," said Dudley.

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared the old borderman; "wer'n't that a comical situation, tho' I swar I'd as lief be skulped as to support two hundred and fifty pounds by the ha'r of the head. But, boys, that ole score atwixt me and Big-Foot is settled. I warped it to the varlet, and thar is his scalp to testify to the fact."

"Good for you, Hurricane!" shouted the claim-stakers.

"You see, boys," the old hunter continued, "I've got a good hoss free gratis along with Big-Foot's scalp. It's a splendid hoss, too; but, boys, I arnt it."

"Hurricane," said Ross-grove, with an impatient gesture, "I would like to speak with you a moment."

"Sartinly, John, sartinly," replied the hunter, giving his animal into the care of Ransom Kendall.

The two stepped aside and conversed a few minutes in an undertone, then Wild Dick was called to them. The three conversed several minutes longer, then rejoined the rest of the party.

The next hour was passed in listening to Hurricane narrate his adventures with Big-Foot.

The maidens prepared the old hunter a sumptuous breakfast, of which he partook with a keen relish. The day passed slowly, with no excitement of an unusual character.

As the shades of night began to gather, Wild Dick took his departure for Spain, accompanied by Old Hurricane.

Captain Ross-grove opened the gate for them, and, as they passed out, Dick said:

"Captain, when we return we will bring your wife with us."

"We will, John, by the shades of the old prophets," added Hurricane.

"May Heaven speed you, boys," responded the captain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"HIGH" TIMES AT SPAIN.

NIGHT had long since enveloped the land in darkness when the Dumb Spy and Old Hurricane drew near the outlaw village. Having approached as near as they dare without encountering some of the settlers, they came to a halt and listened. The first sound they heard was the rumble of wagon-wheels in the village, and this at once led to the inference that some new movement was on foot among the outlaws.

"I'll tell you, Hurricane," said Wild Dick, "suppose you remain right here while I run down and see what's up, and what our prospect is. If I'm locked up to guard Missus John, I'll give you a signal from the winder."

"All right, Dick, all right," replied the hunter.

Dick at once took his departure, and entered the village. He saw there was a light in the court-room, and gaining his own apartment in the rear, his ears were greeted by the sound of voices pitched in tones of anger.

He discovered that a number of the leading spirits of Spain were assembled in council, and from their conversation he soon learned what they had met for.

It appeared that their treasure cave had been discovered and robbed of some of its valuables, either by the claim-stakers or the Moles; and that, during that day, Reckless Ralph and Thoms had been at the cave and had packed up a large box full of articles of great value, and during that night they intended to transfer them from the cave to the village.

Four trusty confederates had been selected to bring

them, and their wagon already stood in waiting at the door for the trip. One of the men had entered the court-room for instructions, which Reckless Ralph proceeded to give.

"Bring the large box," he said, "marked with an X cut on the upper side. This you will find very heavy, but then four, or even three of you, will have no trouble in handling it. There are, also, two small boxes marked as the large one, which you will bring."

"Where are they to be delivered, or rather, deposited, captain?" asked one of the men.

"The two small ones will be placed in this room, and the large one in my daughter's prison-room, where her guard can also guard the box."

Without further talk the man left the room and joined his three friends in the wagon at the door, then they took their departure for the treasure-vault.

Gliding from his room, the Dumb Spy crept away to where Old Hurricane was concealed. In a few words he acquainted the hunter with what was going on among the outlaws, and after discussing the matter a few minutes, both turned and proceeded at a rapid pace toward the robbers' treasure-vault.

Leaving them we will return to the court-room, where Reckless Ralph and Thoms remained in conversation; for, of late, most of their time was spent in counsel.

"The raft will be completed and the cannon mounted by to-morrow noon; then we will begin the ascent of the river, and by the following morning we will be ready to demolish Fort Defiance, unless they accede to an unconditional surrender. I do not intend to trifle with them longer. We have already lost a number of men at their hands, and the Indians can scarcely compute their loss. Why, these claim-stakers have got so devilish impudent as to raise an American flag over their works, and my greatest wish is to tear it to shreds before their eyes, for I tell you, Thoms, I always despised that flag, and I have a reason for it, too."

"Ha! ha!" laughed Thoms. "I suppose certain incidents in your past life won't justify your livin' in safety under the Stars and Stripes."

"No difference about the past, Thoms; the future is what will tell with you and me. However, I hope, if our plans worked out all right, Old Black-Hawk has been assassinated before this for his imbecility in granting Ross-grove and party a permit to locate claims on the Reserve without consulting his tribes."

"Black-Hawk is a singular Indian, Judge, and history will call him a great chief for his acts, whether he merits it or not. But, where's Witless Seth, Judge? I haven't seen him since mornin'."

"He left on one of his usual daily rambles this morning, and I'll guarantee he'll bring some news from the claim-stakers' movements when he comes; and I hope he will come soon, for I have work for him."

They talked on. Something like two hours had been thus passed, when a footstep was heard in the mute's room, and still a short time later, a man came to the door and said:

"Captain, the boys have come with the boxes."

"Indeed? A quick trip they made," replied the robber-chief, and followed by Thoms, he went out to where the wagon was drawn up at the foot of the stairs leading up to the door of Camilla's prison-room.

Reckless Ralph examined the boxes to see that they were the right ones, and finding they were, he ordered the largest one removed from the vehicle and carried up-stairs.

This box was about four feet square, securely nailed up, and it was with great difficulty the men scrambled up the stairs with it, and deposited it in one corner of Camilla's room, Ralph having preceded them and unlocked the door.

When the men had left the room, the robber-chief said to his prisoner:

"My dear madam, permit me to say that there are jewels in that box worth a king's ransom; and they will all be ours, together, some day. Just think of it: there are silks and satins in that box, and nearly every fold is laid between with jewels and silver plate. Ay, there are diamonds of the first water in that box, my dear, so guard them for you and me; and when I come back in a few minutes, I will show them all to you."

With these mocking, hateful words the villain left the room; and when the prisoner heard the door closed and looked upon her again, she sunk into a chair and burst into a deep paroxysm of tears.

She wept long and bitterly, until she fell into a kind of mental stupor. But she was suddenly aroused from this mood of mind by a low, crashing noise in the room, and starting to her feet, she gazed around her in apparent bewilderment. She could still hear that steady crashing noise, but her mind was so confused that she could not locate the point from whence the sound came. At length, however, her eyes happened to fall upon the large treasure-box in the corner.

She starts, and a low cry of terror escapes her lips. She sees the top of the box being pressed slowly upward. Something possessed of life is within it. The top is burst off. A human head, followed by a pair of broad, massive shoulders, appears to her view—deeps, with scarce an effort, from out the great box.

Camilla sunk speechless in her chair. She could not cry out, she could not speak, nor could she remove her transfixed gaze from the great, rough, bearded face before her.

The mysterious stranger saw at once the effect his presence had upon her, and in a low, husky tone, intended for a whisper, he said:

"Don't fear me, don't take on, lady; I'm here to save you—I'm Old Hurricane, I am."

There was something in the man's very words and looks that removed the chill of terror from Camilla's heart and mind, and again sent a warm thrill through her form.

"What other evidence," she gained composure to ask, "have you to give me of your being my friend?"

"Why, lady, I've no writings of any kind," replied our hero, "but, if I should just say John Ross-grove sent me here, would—"

"That is sufficient!" cried Camilla; "you are my friend; but your presence here in that box caused me to doubt you."

The old hunter smiled and replied:

"That was a ticklish situation, Missus John Ross-grove, for the knaves had me standin' on my head half the time, and it took a heap of nerve to keep an equilibrium. But all's well that ends well, they say. You no doubt wonder how I came in that box, so I'll tell you. Wild Dick, a friend of ours, Missus John, found out that the outlaws war goin' to bring that box into this room, filled with jewels and diamonds. So we hurried to their treasure cave, broke open the box and emptied out enough of the things to make room for my figure, and you may bet thar wer'n't many things left. Wal, I got into the box, and Dick nailed it up, and concealed all traces of our work. A few minutes later the outlaws came and packed me right straight from the cave to your room. I'll admit I'm not a jewel of the first water, Missus John, for all that robber bragged heaply of the jewels in that box; nor am I a very handsome man, either, but I can boast an honest heart, and, as I mean you well, Missus John, it will not be well to talk here too long. I'm here to rescue you and take you to your John, who's not a hundred miles away; so, if you have a hat and shawl, put them on, for the air is damp and chilly. That robber'll soon be here, then, if you are not used to rights of violence, cover your eyes and refuse to listen."

Camilla, with a light heart, went to her bedroom, and, while she was getting ready for her departure with the hunter, the latter was busy in the other room preparing bonds for the robber chief.

When ready for her flight, Camilla knelt down and invoked the blessing and aid of the Divine Father in the dangers before her; then she rejoined the hunter.

A few minutes later footsteps were heard ascending the stairs.

"Be ready to leave the room, Missus John; the instant I throttle the villain. The Dumb Spy will meet you at the foot of the stairs and conduct you to a place of safety."

As he concluded, the old hunter sprang behind the door, where he would be at the robber's back when he entered.

The rattle of sliding bolts was at once succeeded by the creak of the opening door, and Reckless Ralph strode into the room.

Camilla stood before him, prepared for departure. "Heigh, ho!" exclaimed the villain; "you must be going out, my dear!"

"I am," Camilla replied, calmly.

"Well," retorted the irate robber, "this is cool, but I have something to say about your going out."

"And so have I," said a voice behind him, and the next instant his throat was clutched within the rigid grasp of Old Hurricane's great iron fingers.

The villain gasped and struggled, but his efforts were as futile as an infant's would have been.

Camilla shot out at the door, ran down the stairs, at the foot of which she was met by the Dumb Spy, who made himself known, then conducted her hastily away northward. When they had gained a point of safety on the outskirts of the village, they stopped to wait for Old Hurricane.

They had not long to tarry. The old hunter soon came.

"It's a success, is it, Dick?" he asked.

"It is, so far as I know."

"Wal, I left that knave bound and gagged and locked in the room. He may and he may not get the use of his lungs inside of to-night, but, for fear, we will have to move with dispatch from here."

With Camilla at his side, the old hunter hurried away northward, while Wild Dick returned to Spain.

Knowing the inability of Camilla to journey on foot to the fort, Old Hurricane headed toward a certain point on the river, where the Dumb Spy had concealed a canoe for them.

They moved with as much haste as possible, and in less than an hour reached the river. The hunter found the canoe, and at once embarked with his fair charge up the stream, and, under his powerful strokes, the little craft went skimming like a bird over the water.

They conversed but little. The old hunter was too intent on his labor at the paddle and look-out for dangers to talk, while Camilla was picturing in her mind the joys of the promised meeting with her young husband.

Thus the minutes wore away and lengthened into hours, and at last Old Hurricane announced to his fair charge the pleasing intelligence that they were but a few minutes' paddling from the fort.

Scarcely a moment later, his practiced ears caught the plash of paddles above them, and, peering forward into the gloom, he discovered a canoe, with several occupants, descending the river.

Turning to Camilla, he said, in a tone devoid of uneasiness or fear:

"We'll be detained a moment, Missus John, but don't take on. We'll have to drop in shoreward, for thar's a canoe coming down the river, and it may contain enemies. Leastwise, it'll not be prudent, with my knowledge of the dangers of this land, to go on."

A sigh of regret escaped Camilla's lips as the hunter turned the canoe abruptly toward the west shore. A few strokes of the paddle sufficed to carry them close in shore, where the boat, with its occupants, was concealed in a dense fringe of reeds that grew along in the margin of the water.

The hunter now bent his head and listened for the descending canoe. Strange to say, not a sign of it could be heard or seen. It had disappeared, and the first supposition of the hunter was that those in the strange craft had discovered his approach and had turned out, also. However the case might be, he was too cautious to venture out without some further knowledge of his situation, especially while the fair Camilla was under his sole charge.

For fully half an hour he remained there without hearing the slightest sound, not even that of the insects so peculiar to such places. All this silence was not a good omen to the ears of the borderman. It boded the presence of danger, yet he let no word nor look betray his thoughts and fears to Camilla.

At length the moon came up, and as it arose above the tree-tops, flooding the eastern side of the river with its mellow beams, the hunter arose to his feet and endeavored to gain some information as to the whereabouts of the strange craft, but his efforts were in vain.

To the right of him Hurricane saw a little circular area, or glade, in the reeds, upon which the moon's rays fell unobstructed; and he was about to drive his canoe into this opening when he saw its glassy surface suddenly broken by a succession of tiny waves chasing each other across its bosom.

The curiosity as well as the fears of the old borderman were aroused, for simultaneous with the discovery he detected a slight rustling among the reeds. Permitting his gaze to linger upon the water, he was not a little surprised on seeing something like the body of a beaver float softly across the glade and disappear among the shadows on the opposite side. This was immediately succeeded by a louder noise behind it, and the next instant the sharp prow of a canoe pressed into view and clove the water of the little glade.

The old hunter saw that it was an Indian canoe made of bark, and when it had drifted into view, he was not a little surprised to see it contained no occupants. There was, however, a heap of something in the bottom, covered over with a red blanket, but there was no sign of life visible about it. From whence did the boat receive its motive power? The hunter cudgeled his brain for an answer, but he could fix upon nothing definite, unless the object he took for a beaver was the disguised head of an Indian who was making his way through the water and reeds and towing the canoe after him. But if so why did the savage observe such secrecy in his movements? And what was under that flaming blanket in the canoe to justify him in his endeavors, under such difficulties, to save it?

These were questions the old hunter propounded, and while revolving them in his mind, another canoe, following directly on the trail of the first one, suddenly appeared in the little opening.

There were three persons in it. They were white, and a single glance told the old borderman who they were: Captain John Rossgrove, Nolsy Nat, and young Kendall, the Boy Ranger.

But why were they there, following upon the trail of that mysterious canoe.

CHAPTER XIX. THE MEETING.

THE presence of his three friends there, at that time, following upon the trail of that mysterious canoe, at once convinced Old Hurricane that all was not right; and he was in the act of making their presence known when Camilla, who had caught sight of her husband, through the thin wall of intervening reeds, uttered a cry of joy that could have been heard across the river.

"Love can't keep still; it's no use tryin'," muttered Old Hurricane, and dipping his paddle, he swung the canoe around into the opening.

The click of gunlocks accompanied the movement, but one word from Old Hurricane allayed all fears of danger.

Then there was a wild fluttering of two hearts, a low exclamation of joy welled from the lips of the husband and wife, and the next moment Rossgrove was in the hunter's canoe with his idolized Camilla folded to his breast.

Old Hurricane stepped from his canoe into that of his friends, and while the captain and his wife were clasped in each other's embrace, he asked:

"What are you fellows doin' hereaways, Ransom?" "We are in pursuit of a couple of Indians that captured Dolly and Dora about sunset this mornin'."

"Oh, Lord!" the old hunter fairly groaned, "is it possible them little angels are in the hands of the red hellsyons?"

"They were captured," said Ransom, "shortly after your departure with Wild Dick. You know no Indians had been seen about all day, and the girls having grown restless and tired with being shut up in the fort, were permitted to go out for a few minutes' walk. They were not to go beyond rifle-range of the fort, and obeyed these restrictions, but as they were walking leisurely along the banks of the little creek, two powerful savages sprung up out of the water, and seizing them, bore them rapidly away. The captain, Nat and myself gave chase. The red-skins had a canoe concealed on the river hard by, in which they at once embarked. We chased them into this border of reeds, and are now following their trail through the reeds, for you see a plain track is left where their canoe pressed through."

"Then by the gods of Olympus!" blurted the old hunter, "the canoe passed over this very spot a minute ago! The gals were alone in the canoe kivered with a red blanket, and the Injuns were out in the water towin' the craft along. I didn't see through it then, boys, but now all's—"

"Let us not lose another minute in continuing the pursuit," broke in Captain Rossgrove, who, in his moments of joy, was not forgetful of his friends and their safety.

"All right, John," responded Old Hurricane; "you remain right here with your wife, and we'll continue the chase."

The next instant the canoe had glided in among the reeds on the trail of the Indian craft.

When Captain Rossgrove found himself alone with his wife, he said:

"My dear Camilla, tell me now why it is that you were here in this country a prisoner in the hands of the outlaws?"

"I will tell you, John, all I know about it. It seems as though the outlaws knew of your departure from Columbus, for on the third day after you left, I received a letter purporting to come from one of your men—Harry Dudley. It stated that you had fallen violently ill, and were then lying at the point of death in a trading-post at the mouth of the Des Moines river, where you wanted me to hasten by the first boat. Never dreaming but it was all true, I took passage on the little steamer Fire-Fly, for the trading-post. During the passage I met an old acquaintance on the boat, named Robert Raft, who introduced me to his daughter Madeline, and who seemed to exercise no little authority on the boat. However, on the second night of our passage, I was put under the influence of chloroform, from which I never recovered until I was locked in my prison at Spain."

"The accursed devils, they shall pay for this!" Rossgrove fairly hissed.

"As soon as I recovered from the effects of the drug, and found where I was," continued Camilla, "I knew the letter was a forged one to entrap me. And since my captivity, I have learned from Raft himself that he is the notorious Reckless Ralph, leader of the river-pirates, and that the Fire-Fly is Raft's own boat, used by his gang under false colors, to assist in the piratical raids on the river commerce. His object in abducting me was to extort a large sum of money from father, against whom he holds an old grudge, for my release. If he had anything else in view, he never made mention of it; and now, John, tell me what reason you had to suppose I was a prisoner in Spain, when you showed my picture to the hunter-spy?"

"I saw you in the arms of Raft, passing down the river in a canoe."

"And why did you not attempt my release, John?"

"Because I was a fool, Camilla, a stupid fool. Just before I saw you, I received an anonymous letter through the hands of a mute, which informed me that you were false to me, and when I saw you lying in Raft's arms, your face upturned to his, as it is to mine now, I was fool enough to believe the letter."

"Oh, John! John!" she cried, in agony of spirit, "you should never have doubted me!"

"I know it, dear Camilla, and I hope God will never permit me to be guilty of such a crime—yes, crime—again."

While this understanding between the young husband and wife was being had, Old Hurricane and his two friends were pressing rapidly in pursuit of Dora and Dolly's captors. The trail left by the canoe of the savages was easily followed, for the reeds, pressed apart or broken, did not assume their upright position at once.

By standing up in the canoe Hurricane saw, by the trembling reeds that the enemy was but a short distance ahead of them; and still, but a few rods in advance of them—the enemy—he saw the reeds terminated in the open, moonlit river. Here, he knew, the pursuit would soon come to an end, unless the Indians, when deprived of the cover of the reeds, took to the woods.

Creeping on as fast as possible, our friends suddenly became aware of a third canoe moving rapidly through the reeds a few yards to their right, and in a course parallel with their own.

This discovery put a different phase on the hopes of the rescuers, for they knew not but that the canoe was loaded with savages trying to get in ahead of them and cover the retreat of their friends with the captives.

But Old Hurricane declared nothing but death itself should deter him from his set purpose to save the girls, and he at once began pulling the boat rapidly forward by the reeds. They gained rapidly upon the two savages, and when the latter had just emerged from the reeds, the whites were about two rods behind.

As had been feared, the savages turned toward the shore the instant they were clear of the reeds; so, to prevent their getting into the woods with the captives, the pursuers threw every energy into the effort of overhauling them.

At the same instant they made this move, the strange craft at the right seemed to have been inspired with the same determination, for it shot forward with a crashing noise through the reeds. But, just as our three friends drifted out into the river, this noise ceased. The mysterious craft had stopped on the margin of the reeds, a few inches of its sharp prow being visible, but no occupant could be seen on account of the dense stalks.

The pursuers saw that one of the savages had climbed into the canoe, and they were just crossing the prow of the strange craft in the reeds, when the second savage reached up, and grasping the rim of the canoe, was about to throw himself into it, when a cry of agony burst suddenly from his lips, and he

sunk backward into the river, his arms beating the water in the convulsions of death.

The other savage uttered a wild scream, and leaping overboard, struck out for shore, while Dora and Dolly threw aside the blanket that covered them, and, wild with terror, gazed around them.

"By the gods of Olympus!" burst from Old Hurricane, "Scarlet Death has cooled that Injun's system, and that's the prov of the Demon's canoe there, boys— Ah, there it goes crashin' away like rip through the reeds! Easy, girls, easy; we're friends and lovers, too—"

"Oh! it's our friends, Dora!" cried Dolly, wild with joy.

"Yes, yes, you little rogues," said the hunter, with a pleasant chuckle, as they ran alongside of the canoe they were in; "been gallantin' round with the red boys, eh? I tell you Ransom, fur one, is orful jealous, Dolly."

Dolly's face flushed crimson, for just then Ransom was assisting her into their canoe, but when she had got seated and somewhat reconciled to the change that had come so suddenly to her, she gave uncle Hurricane a downright good scolding, that only served to kindle the joy in his great heart, and the glow of admiration in his eyes and upon his rough-bearded face.

With the maidens, the party now returned to where they had left Captain Rossgrove and his wife, and after a few moments' talk and congratulations and introductions all round, they all started on their return to the fort, where they arrived in safety in the course of an hour.

CHAPTER XX.

THE CANNON'S BOOM.

IT is useless to attempt a description of the rage and anger into which Reckless Ralph was thrown in consequence of his rough usage by Old Hurricane. For fully an hour he lay upon the floor in total darkness, writhing in his bonds for freedom and gasping for breath, for the old hunter had tied a heavy bandage over his mouth. But, when the outlaw got the use of his lungs, his vociferous yells soon brought assistance.

The door of the room had to be burst open, Hurricane having locked it after him and carried off the key, and as Calo Thoms went thundering into the room, he asked:

"Why, captain, what does this mean?"

"Mean?" roared Raft, in a fit of rage; "it means you are all a set of cursed louts to let an enemy sneak into the village under your very noses! Bring a light, one of you! That infernal Old Hurricane was concealed in this room when I entered, and he escaped with that woman!"

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Thoms.

"Yes, it's more than possible; it's a mystery how that plant ever got into this room."

"Here's a light; we'll soon see!" shouted Thoms.

One of the men had brought a lantern from the court-room, and as he entered the apartment where Raft was, a cry burst from every lip when they caught sight of the jewel-box in the corner.

"There!" hissed the outlaw chief, throwing all the ferocious passion of his soul into the words; "there is the way in which he got into this room! An infernal bright set of men those four that brought that box here with a big traitor in it. I swear I'd shoot them dead if they were here!"

"But how came he in the box, captain?" asked Thoms.

"How would you suppose?" retorted Raft.

"That's the question. You see he couldn't nail himself up in the box. No, he's had help, and then the question arises again, what was he nailed in the box for?"

"To rescue the girl, to be sure."

"Then some one must have told Hurricane where the box was to be deposited; he couldn't have guessed it so exact. So it stands to reason, Judge, that that's a traitor in camp!"

"Then it is one of the Moles," said Raft, "and see here, boys, the escape of that woman is going to give us trouble, for she knows enough to send every one of us to the State's prison for life. She has been taken to that so-called Fort Defiance, and so we must make preparations to kill or capture every devil of them."

"That's the right talk, captain," shouted those around him.

After some further conversation, the crowd dispersed, and soon all became quiet once more in Spain.

The following morning Reckless Ralph summoned the Dumb Spy to his room and instructed him as follows:

"Seth, my daughter was released last night by that big hunter called Hurricane. I suppose they went to the claim-staker's fort. I want you to go there to-day and find out all that will be of value to us."

The Dumb Spy acknowledged his willingness to do his master's bidding, and in a short time he was moving northward. However, he did not go far in the direction taken, but turned eastward and struck the river about a mile from Spain. Hard by on the river lay a large scow, or flat-boat, that had been used as a ferry-boat, but which was being refitted now for another purpose. It was about thirty feet long, and made like a canoe, being sharp at stem and stern, while the sides were high and flaring.

Near this ungainly craft the Dumb Spy concealed himself, and in less than ten minutes after, a number of the outlaws, provided with axes and other tools, made their appearance and went to work on the boat. With heavy planks they proceeded to lay a stout deck on the scow.

The Dumb Spy watched the work with deep inter-

est, for he well knew what it meant; at the same time revolving in his mind a plan by which he might defeat the outlaws in their vile work.

In less than two hours the deck was all completed, and the float presented quite a substantial appearance. In a few minutes more a pair of horses, hitched to a cart, came in view. They were driven by Reckless Ralph, and on the cart was mounted a small brass howitzer! This formidable implement of war was at once taken aboard the scow and placed near the center of the deck.

A second team, bringing a supply of ammunition and other things, soon made its appearance. Its contents were unloaded and conveyed aboard the craft, some of the ammunition being stowed away in the capacious hold. Among the principal articles, upon which the outlaws set great store, was the keg of rum.

Reckless Ralph superintended the outfitting of the gunboat, and by the time the sun stood on the meridian, he announced all in readiness for departure.

About twenty of the best men had been selected to man the boat, and, armed to the teeth, they went aboard. All seemed jubilant over some expected adventure and the keg of rum that had been left on deck.

The brass howitzer appeared to be quite a curiosity to most of the men. This was evidence that it had not been an article of public property in Spain. In fact, its being in the outlaw village was known to but few until that day, for it had found its way into the place years before, when this portion of the country was a Spanish possession, and had lain concealed in a cellar.

Reckless Ralph, having had some experience as an artilleryman, spent most of the previous night cleaning up the old gun, and getting it in readiness for use. The supply of ammunition was ample, and the outlaw convinced himself that nothing but time stood between them and the total destruction of the claim-stakers.

By means of long poles or sweeps the robbers now pushed their battery out into the river, then turned and began their journey up the stream. Feeling fresh and vigorous, with an occasional "lift" from the rum keg, the men at the sweeps urged the great clumsy boat along at fair speed.

The Dumb Spy was soon on his way to Fort Defiance, after the departure of the boat. He had gained some information which he was desirous of imparting to the claim-stakers, soon as possible. In fact, their lives depended upon it, for they were in no way prepared to resist the power the outlaws of the Dispute were now about to bring against them.

He arrived at the fort in good time, and imparted his information. He remained in conference with his friends several hours, and when he finally took his departure, it was with a great and dangerous responsibility resting upon his shoulders.

After leaving the fort, he proceeded down the river and met the robbers on the boat.

He was at once taken aboard and questioned by Reckless Ralph.

"Is Old Hurricane at Fort Defiance?" he asked, in the silent language of the mute.

"Yes," the Dumb Spy replied.

"And my daughter, too?"

"Yes."

"Have the claim-stakers got wind of our movements?"

"No."

"How far is their fort from the river?"

"Just twenty steps."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Raft, turning to his men, "we are all right, boys. By daylight to-morrow morning we will be ready to sweep Fort Defiance across the plain. By that time Thoms will have the Indians—the land forces—over along the bluffs to cut off the retreat of the claim-stakers when driven from their fort by our cannon. Ha! ha! it will be a lively time, boys, but it won't take many rounds to knock that pen into a cocked hat."

The Dumb Spy was, fortunately, retained on board the boat and was assigned a post of duty. This was to deal out to each man his rations of cooked food that was stowed away in the hold, and also his mug of rum.

When darkness set in, the outlaws did not tie up their boat, but continued steadily on, and shortly after midnight the signal of their scout, who had been sent on ahead, announced their juxtaposition to Fort Defiance sufficient to bring their cannon to bear upon the little defense. So a halt was at once made, and the boat ran close in shore and tied up to await the coming of day.

"Boys, said Reckless Ralph, "it is three hours until daylight yet, and, as we may have a hard day's work before us, we had better try and get a few hours' sleep and rest. One or two can be detailed as guards, and be relieved every hour. What say you, men?"

"Ay, ay!" was the general response.

"Then, for fear of the malaria in the river atmosphere, I'll have Witless Seth to fill each a cup brimming full of rum."

This was another pleasant idea that met the general approval of the men, and so the captain ordered Seth to hand out the liquor.

When the "preventative" had been imbibed, a watch was detailed. It consisted of two men, one of whom was stationed on each end of the boat. The rest of the party now spread their blankets on the deck and laid down to sleep, the Dumb Spy being among them.

But in less than half an hour the latter raised to a sitting posture and gazed around him. The outlaws were all sound asleep. This he could tell by their heavy respirations.

The spy now arose to his feet, and, on tiptoe, moved to the north end of the boat, where he found

the other guard leaning against the rum-keg, with the cup by his side; and he was sound asleep, too.

A smile of satisfaction passed over the face of the spy, as he turned and raised the rude "hatch" and gazed down into the hold. It was dark as pitch below, but, carefully sliding the hatch-door to one side, he turned, and taking something from his pocket, that emitted a dull, phosphorescent glow, laid it in the palm of his hand and held it above his head.

Five minutes later a figure, muffled from head to foot in a great blanket, came from the woods on the west shore and paused upon the bank. The Dumb Spy pointed to the opening in the deck; then the strange figure came aboard the boat, crossed the deck like a shadow, and hastily descended into the dark hold of the boat.

This figure stowed away, Wild Dick turned, and again held up his hand, with that glowing signal in it.

Then another figure, muffled from head to foot, came from the dense shadows of the woods aboard the craft, and was stowed away in the dark hold.

Again the Dumb Spy gave his signal, and repeated it, until a dozen or more of those mysterious shadows had come from the woods and sought concealment in the hold.

And all this time the robbers slept on.

The Dumb Spy replaced the hatch as he had found it, and then laid down to watch and wait but not to sleep.

Thus the night wore away and morning dawned; however, the sun was nearly an hour high when the first robber awoke.

Then Reckless Ralph was aroused, and, when he saw what time it was, he cursed the stupidity of himself and his men for sleeping like logs. But he, forthwith, endeavored to excuse himself on the grounds of having a dull, queer headache, but when each of his men had filed a similar complaint, he saddled the blame onto the rum-keg, and, in a fit of rage, he tossed it overboard.

The attention of the crew was drawn to the work before them. They could see the little fort of the claim-stakers standing boldly out on the plain, its flag waving proudly and defiantly in the morning air. A little column of smoke was drifting up from the interior of the fort, and the colossal figure of Old Hurricane could be seen standing on the rampart, leaning on his long rifle and regarding them with indifferent curiosity.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Reckless Ralph, "how I would like to send a cannon-ball through that infernal, impudent old scoundrel!"

"Keep cool, captain, and we'll fetch him off thar pretty soon," said one of the men.

The fort was about four hundred yards away, and the outlaws had nothing to fear with this distance between them and the claim-stakers' rifles.

One of the party was sent ashore with a flag of truce, and orders to demand the unconditional surrender of the fort, with all the men, women and weapons.

Old Hurricane displayed his cap on the muzzle of his rifle as a counter-flag, and, when the robber had approached within hailing distance, the old hunter yelled out:

"What do you want here, Mister?"

"I have come to demand the immediate and unconditional surrender of your fort and all within it," replied the robber.

"You don't say!" retorted Old Hurricane; "suppose we don't see fit to chalk up?"

"We will open fire on you with a twelve-pound cannon at once."

"Then, trock back and open. What's a twelve-pound cannon? Why, my ole rifle weighs more'n that."

"All right, old ignorance," replied the outlaw, and, turning, he retraced his footsteps to the boat and delivered the old hunter's reply to their demand.

"Just so," exclaimed Reckless Ralph, turning to the cannon, which was already sighted upon the fort. "I would just as lief it would be that way as any, for we'll have the fun of demolishing the whole concern."

Old Hurricane had withdrawn from his exposed position on the rampart, much to the regret of Reckless Ralph, who now took the match from the hand of a comrade, and applied it to the touch-hole of the howitzer.

The next moment the sullen boom of the piece awoke the morning echoes for miles and miles.

CHAPTER XXI.

TURNING THE TABLES.

For a moment a great cloud of smoke hung between the eyes of the robbers and Fort Defiance, but when it finally cleared away they saw that their first shot had not touched the enemy's defense. So the cannon was at once reloaded and carefully trained upon the fort. The second shot struck some of the upper timbers, shivering them into splinters.

A shout of triumph pealed from the outlaws' lips, and was answered from the throats of a hundred savages that were lying in ambush along the extremities of the plain.

Singular as it seemed to the outlaws, not one of the claim-stakers made himself visible, and, following up the advantage already gained, the cannon was kept playing with terrible effect upon the fort. A breach had been made in the south wall, that would enable a storming party to carry it with ease.

Still none of the claim-stakers had been seen, nor had Old Hurricane ventured to show himself again. The fort was being battered down at such a fearful rate as would necessitate some demonstration on the part of the defenders or occupants. But, when several more shots had been fired, and the claim-stakers

made no movement or show, Reckless Ralph began to suspect all was not right, and at last his suspicions found expression in the exclamation:

"Boys, we've been outwitted again!"

"Outwitted? Why, captain, what do you mean?" asked a robber.

"I mean we've been firing like a parcel of fools, upon a deserted fort. The claim-stakers have given us the slip."

"Good Lor! It can't be possible!"

"It is possible, though—but, see here; every man prepare to storm the fort. The enemy may be hiding away in holes like conies, frightened almost to death by our cannon's boom."

For the next minute there was a wild commotion on board the boat. Each man looked to the priming of his rifle, loosening his pistols and knives, and then went ashore.

"Forward, and no quarter to the men," shouted Reckless Ralph.

At a full run they charged upon the fort. They reached it without an opposing shot. They swarmed in through the breach in the wall; they found the fort—DESERTED!

A shout of mingled triumph and disappointment now rent the air. Then from the bluffs to the westward groups of savages came swarming across the plain, and joined their white friends in the little fortification. A wild and terrible confusion now reigned.

Every hole and corner within the work was searched for concealed foes, for the strange disappearance of Old Hurricane led them to believe there was some secret hiding-place about the fort.

But in this they were mistaken, as they found to their sorrow, when a deep bass voice suddenly called out, like the blast of a trumpet, high above the noise of the exultant allies:

"Surrender there, surrender, every mother's son of you, or, by the gods of Olympus, you'll be blown into the clouds! Surrender, you devils, surrender!"

The savages and outlaws started, sudden terror stamped upon their features. A deadly silence fell upon the little fort. The astounded allies gazed from one to another with interrogative looks.

"Surrender, you demons, or we'll open fire upon you," rung that voice again.

Every eye was at once turned in the direction from whence the demand came, and, to the dismay and horror of the outlaws, they saw Old Hurricane standing on the forward end of their scow, while, just behind him and near the cannon, stood Captain John Rossgrove, and just behind him stood his men, with rifles in hand.

Captain Rossgrove, being a capital artilleryman, had trained the cannon on the fort, and now stood ready to apply the match.

Crazed with sudden rage, Reckless Ralph shouted to his men:

"Charge them!—charge the devils!"

In a wild, crowding mass the outlaws and savages went swarming out through the breach in the wall of the fort, and went charging like howling demons toward the boat.

The next instant a solid shot from the howitzer went plowing through the ranks of the advancing foe, causing them to recoil, turn and flee with terror.

Reckless Ralph, Thoms and an Indian chief endeavored to rally the panic-stricken horde, but all in vain. Like frightened sheep they fled across the plain and sought shelter among the hills, and there was no alternative but for Reckless Ralph, Thoms and the chief to follow them, for Captain Rossgrove handled the cannon with great skill and made things warm for awhile.

Thus the tables had been completely turned, and the outlaws and their allies gloriously defeated. As the reader has no doubt inferred, all was due to the stratagem of Wild Dick, who had drugged the rum that threw them into a deep sleep, then admitted the claim-stakers, one by one, into the hold of the boat.

Old Hurricane had made his exit and escape from the little fort by wading the creek to the river, then crawling under the river-bank to the boat.

The claim-stakers now moved the boat up the river to a point opposite the fort, and, having landed, they again took possession of their fortification. They proceeded forthwith to repair the damage done to the wall, and by sunset had it in a condition good as ever, and the captured howitzer mounted so that it could be turned in an instant in any direction that the foe might come.

But where were the women—Camilla, Dora and Dolly?

Before leaving the fort they had been conducted to a point of safety a few miles east of the river; and, as soon as darkness again set in, Harry Dudley, Ransom Kendall and Noley Nat, were sent to conduct them back to the stronghold.

It was shortly after dark when the three men took their departure and crossed the river. They were compelled to feel their way with caution, for they knew not but that Indians were outlying about the fort to capture any small party or scout that might venture out.

They reached the women, however, without trouble, to find them safe, though almost distracted with fear and anxiety, for the roar of the cannon had been borne distinctly to their ears.

The party at once set off on their return to the fort, but were now compelled to undergo an unexpected difficulty. A heavy, damp fog was settling around them, excluding every ray of light, rendering the air chill and dull, and deadening the vibration upon which the ear of the hunter so much depends in the dark. However, Nat took the lead, and the party pressed forward as rapidly as possible; but the fog continued to thicken until everything was

wrapt in total obscurity; and at last Nat informed his friends that he had lost their course.

This news was received with a feeling bordering on despair by the women, for the day's trials had completely unnerved them. But the assurance of their escort gave them some hopes, and they again moved on.

After hours of wandering about, they struck the river, but neither Nat nor the Boy Ranger was familiar enough with the country to tell whether they were above or below the fort.

In searching along the bank for some landmark that might impart the desired information, they were so fortunate as to find an old dug-out, in which they succeeded in crossing the stream.

A consultation was now held as to the direction they should take; but no one could give any adequate idea of the proper course. Every star was shut from view by the dismal fog, and not a breath of air was stirring.

They finally decided to travel down the river for a couple of miles, and if they did not then reach the fort, they would retrace their steps and continue on up the stream.

So they at once began their uncertain journey, moving slow and cautiously. In fact, they could move no other way, for the darkness was so intense that they could scarcely see their hands before them, and were compelled to pick their way with care.

After an hour's journeying they emerged into an open plain, and this gave them reason to believe they were following the proper course. They believed, or had reason to hope, that the plain was the same one upon which the fort was located. If so, by continuing on, they would soon reach their destination. So they moved on, their hopes gaining strength at every step.

But alas! They were suddenly brought to an abrupt halt by the sound of voices calling to each other from out the depths of the darkness. They were readily recognized as the voices of Indians, who appeared to be lost themselves in the mazes of fog and night.

"I tell you, friends," said Nat, "we're in no little danger, for I should judge by them voices, that a thousand red-skins are abroad upon this plain. But what can the skulkin' knaves be doin' here-aways, I wonder?"

"There is no telling. They may be preparing to storm the fort, if this plain is—"

Here silence was imposed upon the speaker by the sound of a voice shouting:

"Look sharp, red-skins! They entered the plain a few minutes ago. They must not be permitted to get back into the woods, nor reach the fort!"

None knew that voice better than did Camilla Ross-grove. It was the voice of Reckless Ralph!

Scarcely had the villain ceased speaking, when Nat said, in a low tone:

"Here—boys and girls—huddle up here! They're arter us, cuss their pieties!"

Then the dull thud of horses' hoofs was heard approaching, and the next moment a dozen horsemen swept past them.

"Cussed close shave!" exclaimed Nat; "but now for the fort."

The little party hurried forward, but the sound of voices just before them caused them to bend slightly from their course. The result was almost a fatal one, for the next moment they were lost on the plain, while all around them they could still hear those voices calling to each other.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Nat, regretfully, "this is too bad, but no more'n I expected when we left our course in this awful fog. Friends, we've got to be keener, or we'll run into the clutches of the knaves. But if I could git the course again—if our friends only knowed our situation and would fire a gun—"

He did not finish the sentence. Far across the plain, through the dismal fog, he saw a lurid flash, and at the same instant, almost, a cannon ball came screaming through the thick air so close to his head that he was staggered by the wind.

"There it is now, Nat," said the Boy Ranger. "There is our course signal."

"Ay, ay, lad, and it came mortal nigh bein' the last call for me. The boys are tryin' to clear the plain of the red-skins, for they've probably found out we're—for a'd on the double-quick!"

They pressed on, guided by the flash of the cannon, which ever and anon belched across the plain, stirring the fog around them.

"Move brisk, boys, move brisk, red-skins!" a commanding voice suddenly rung out near the fugitives; "move brisk, all of you, for the cannon's flash will guide them!"

Our friends paused.

The next instant the quick tramp of feet swept across their path and died away in the distance.

Then again the cannon vomited out its flame, this time almost over the heads of the fugitives.

"Hurrah! the fort is reached!" shouted Noisy Nat, at the top of his lungs; "ho, friends within! Throw open the gate and let us in, for the hounds of the devil are at our heels!"

CHAPTER XXII. VACATING THE FORT.

"SAVED! Saved! thank God, my darling Camilla!" cried Captain Ross-grove, as the fugitives were admitted to the fort, and his young wife, overcome with fatigue and joy, sunk fainting into his arms.

And now, cheer after cheer went up from the lips of the exultant claim-stakers, and they were answered from the overshadowed plain by yells of derision that seemed to issue in chorus from a thousand savage throats.

At last their friends were all safe and defied the allied host that swarmed around them. Still, they left no point unguarded, and during the remainder

of the night, sentinels were kept posted on the fort, and scouts sent out to patrol the valley.

The night passed away without any demonstration on the part of the foe. With the coming of day the besieged had hopes of the dense fog dispersing, but in this they were disappointed. The white mist seemed to thicken instead of growing lighter, and this protracted gloom made it necessary for the claim-stakers to keep several men on duty as guards and scouts.

Shortly after daylight one of the latter discovered a canoe coming down the river with a single occupant. The craft was moving leisurely and standing boldly out in the middle of the river. As it drew near, our friends saw that the occupant was an Indian chief, and as he came still nearer he was recognized as the old chief, Black-Hawk.

As he gained a point opposite the fort, he headed his canoe toward the shore. Captain Ross-grove, seeing he was going to land, went out to meet him and conduct him into the fort.

All saw that the brow of the old chief was clouded, and that something of a serious nature was weighing heavily upon his mind. He had but little to say, and when he had received a cordial welcome from each of the little band, he turned to Captain Ross-grove, and said:

"Black-Hawk is troubled in his heart; a cloud is upon his brow like the cloud that is upon the face of the heavens."

"I am sorry to hear it, Black-Hawk," replied Ross-grove, "and would be glad if I could do anything for you."

"The pale-face captain can help me some," replied Black-Hawk.

"Then let your wants be known, chief."

"But a few suns ago," the old man began, "Black-Hawk gave the pale-faces permission to stake off claims on our Reserve. It has been the cause of much trouble, for many of my war-chiefs are made rebellious by the white man's fire-water, and they do not approve of my kindness to the pale-faces. Like brave men you have defended the rights I gave you to our Reserve, and many of my rebellious warriors have been slain, and the trouble is growing worse. A fearful storm is gathering around the pale-face land-claimers that all the power of Black-Hawk can not stay."

"Is it possible, Black-Hawk?" asked Ross-grove.

"Yes. While my war-chiefs and their wives did not approve of my giving you permission to locate claims, I could have overruled their objections; but the bad white men on the Dispute gave them fire-water that put the devil in their hearts, and all my power can not drive it away. The power of the bad pale-face that is concealed in his fire-water is greater than the power of Black-Hawk's eloquence, for he is old and feeble; but he has seen the day when mighty chiefs feared his power and trembled at sound of his voice. But all this has passed away like the glories of a summer day. While Black-Hawk does not wish to withdraw the permission he gave the land-claimers, as a friend he would advise them to leave the Reserve before danger befalls them; and now is a good time to go. The Great Spirit has thrown a cloud over the land to conceal the land-claimers from the eyes of their enemies, and it will last full another sun."

"This is quite a surprise to us, Black-Hawk," said Ross-grove; "we have defied the power of our enemies and located our claims. But we have remained here since, only to show our enemies that we are not afraid of them."

"You have done well; but you are in a strange land, and your powder will not hold out with the patience of your enemies."

"True, chief, true," replied Ross-grove, "and we will be advised by you, for we know you mean us well. We will leave your country at once, to come again when the title of your land expires."

"It is well," said the chief, his face lighting up with a glow; "when the snow of another winter has passed and the flowers burst open anew, then the title of the Great Father at Washington begins, and his children can come without fear. But let them ever remember that Black-Hawk is their friend."

"We will never forget you, chief. You have been a friend to us in a trying moment, and if we ever return to this country to live, you will always be a welcome visitor to our firesides."

The old chief smiled in childlike innocence. He seemed highly pleased by the mark of respect shown him by the claim-stakers. Before he went away he was made the happy recipient of many valuable presents—a fine silver watch, a handsome rifle and a rich blanket.

After the departure of the chief a meeting was held, and it was unanimously decided that the party make no delay in getting out of the country.

But how should they go? Their horses had all fallen into the hands of the enemy the night previous.

It was soon settled. They would go by water. They would use the boat captured from the enemy. They could build a wall upon it to protect them from the rifle bullets, and they could mount the howitzer upon it for their defense.

The greatest trouble they would be likely to meet with, would be in passing Spain, for should the enemy get wind of their intentions, as they probably would, they would run the risk of their lives to destroy the whole party of claim-stakers.

Old Hurricane, Noisy Nat, Wild Dick, and Witless Seth, also the Boy Ranger, had agreed to accompany the party to the Des Moines' confluence with the Mississippi, and so the arrangements for the retreat were bestowed upon Old Hurricane. The hunter accepted the trust with all the pride of a man who has had an army consigned to his care, and at once laid out his course for the retreat.

The band was to be divided into two parties—one party to take the boat down the river and around the great bend, while the other party was to take the females, and on foot, cut across the country and meet the boat below the bend if it made the trip past Spain.

The object of this division was to insure the safety of the females, for should the boat be attacked and its defenders compelled to give it up, they would be enabled to make their escape if not incumbered with the females.

The old hunter's plans meeting general approval, work was at once commenced on the float, and by dark all was ready for departure.

Those detailed to carry the craft around the bend took departure shortly after dark, and a few minutes later the other party, under Old Hurricane, crossed the river, and took its way in a south-easterly course through the woods. By his own request, Witless Seth was permitted to accompany this party.

As Black-Hawk had predicted, the fog still hung over the land, and this, together with the darkness, rendered the gloom almost impenetrable; and it was only by Harry Dudley, the young surveyor, consulting his compass occasionally, that they were enabled to proceed at all in the right direction.

The journey before them was a short one; yet, owing to the extreme darkness, it would require several hours, if not the entire night, to make the trip. However, they pressed on with good heart, and about midnight they emerged from the tangled woods into the open prairie. Here they were enabled to move with greater ease and speed, but they suddenly became aware of other persons being abroad upon that plain.

This discovery gave them great uneasiness. It gave rise to the fear that they were being followed by the Indians and outlaws, and should the fog clear away suddenly, as it was likely to do at any hour, escape would be impossible.

They stopped and listened. True enough, Indians were on the plain. But there was no alternative now but to keep on, and so they quickened their footsteps in hopes of reaching some place of security soon.

Old Hurricane brought every faculty into play, in order to keep himself posted as to their proximity to the red foe that now seemed to be scouring the plain in all directions around them.

At times they could hear the swift "swish" of feet through the grass within a few paces of them, yet the deep gloom concealed both parties from each other's eyes.

At length, however, another discovery was made that caused our friends great uneasiness. A light could be seen bobbing about over the plain, and it finally became known to the fugitives that it was a lantern carried by no less a personage than the notorious Lieutenant Cate Thoms.

"Boys," whispered Old Hurricane, "that lantern is likely to cause us some trouble, and should it come hereaways, I shall endeavor to exterminate the thing."

They moved briskly, yet cautiously on. Witless Seth, the mute, followed close at their heels, and although no conversation could be had with him, it was observed that he was constantly on the alert for danger, often pointing out that which could be neither seen nor heard by his friends.

As they pressed on, several pairs of eyes were kept fixed upon the moving lantern, and at length it was seen to be making a circuit that would bring it near the fugitives. The latter made no efforts to elude it, for they felt that it was of the greatest importance to them that it be destroyed as soon as possible. However, they came to a halt as it approached them. They were enabled to see by the light that Thoms was alone, although there was not a doubt but that others were following close behind.

The outlaw was moving in a direction that would lead him directly across the path of, and not three paces from the hunted party.

Old Hurricane had decided upon his course of action. He would let the outlaw pass him, then strike him down from behind. But, to the sudden surprise and fears of all, the instant the outlaw got directly in front of them, he stopped, and turning with his face toward them, held up his lantern so that its rays fell full in their faces! It also lit up the broad, sensual face of the outlaw. Our friends saw his small, ferret eyes dilate, then start with a fiendish glow when he discovered who were before him. They saw his lips part as if to utter a call, but before he could give his cry, there was a sudden "whirr" through the air, and with a low moan, the robber sunk to the earth.

His lantern had fallen from his hand, and leaping forward, Old Hurricane grasped it. As he did so, its rays streamed across the face of the prostrate outlaw, and upon his temple he saw the death-mark of Scarlet Death!

Dropping the lantern, as if through fear of its light showing the mysterious avenger where to strike him, he sprang back to his friends, and in a tone denoting great excitement, he said:

"By the gods of Olympus, friends, Scarlet Death is abroad too! He slew that robber! Come, let's leave, for fear we git a spot. Leave the lantern to show the Indians the mark of the Avenger, and mebbe it'll skeer the varmints off!"

Ross-grove saw, as they followed on after the hunter, that he was not a little excited over the death of Thoms, and that he entertained superstitious fears of Scarlet Death. In fact, the mysterious Demon had proven himself a creature of singular power, and a knowledge of his being about was not calculated to make the captain himself feel entirely at ease. It also served to quicken the steps of all the party—Witless Seth, the poor unfortunate, creeping on behind, unconscious of what was being said.

The death of Thoms was soon discovered by his red allies, and a cry of dismay pealed from their lips. By this time, however, our friends were some distance away, and whether it was owing to the Demon's stroke or not, they met with no further difficulty during the night.

The night wore away quicker than they had wished for, for, under its cover, they had hoped to reach the river, which was still some distance away. Besides, the sun threatened to disperse the fog, for at times it would rise upward from the plain, leaving the whole expanse uncovered, but the next instant it would fall again, darker and denser than ever.

"That risin' and fallin', risin' and fallin' of the fog," said Hurricane, "is a sure sign that it's going to leave afore long."

The party halted for a few minutes on the plain to rest and partake of the meager supply of refreshments prepared before leaving the fort.

Half an hour found them again in motion, and they had begun to congratulate themselves on their escape from the enemy's toils, when suddenly a current of air swept across the plain; the fog lifted from its bosom like a banner of ethereal lacework, and there, on a little eminence, not fifty paces from the weary whites, stood fully two score of Indian warriors gazing directly at them!

CHAPTER XXIII.

DODGING THE DEATH HOUNDS.

"Oh, God, we are in the demons' toils!" cried Captain Rossgrove, at sight of the savages. "Friends, we are doomed—"

The rest of his words were drowned in a yell that pealed from two score of savage throats, mingled with the crack of as many rifles, that cut the fog around them, and as the bullets, fired at random, whistled over the heads of our friends, they seemed to sweep away the current of air that had raised the fog, for almost at the same instant the mist settled down upon the plain, concealing the two parties from the eyes of each other.

Then the swift rush of savage feet was heard approaching, and wild yells rolled through the foggy air.

"Come! come!" cried Old Hurricane, grasping Dolly by the hand and hurrying away in a course at right angles with the one they had been pursuing, closely followed by his friends.

This movement was unseen by the foe, who rushed wildly forward—passed the angle of the fugitives' course, and rushed on into the gloom, supposing they, the fugitives, had turned and fled away in the direction they had come.

The old hunter's dodge had proven a success: he had eluded the foe—for a time at least. They heard the deluded savages far behind them, and from the noise they made, it was evident that they were searching for the trail of the whites.

"Let's hurry on, friends, while we are clear of the varlets," said the Old Land Pilot; "they have noses keen on the trail as a hound, and if they once strike ours in the damp, trodden grass, they'll dog us to death."

"Yes, let us lose no time," added Rossgrove, "for this is our last chance for escape."

"I don't think we're fur from the river, now; and if this fog would just hang a little longer, we'd be all safe. But you see it's preparin' to break away. The sun is drawin' it upward and packin' it into clouds. A gust of wind might lift the whole thing to heaven, and leave us exposed to savage eyes."

"Oh, I pray Heaven it will last till we are safe!" cried Camilla, in a tone of despair.

"Hark! hark!" cried the old hunter, gazing back over his shoulder like a stag at bay.

"What now, Hurricane?" asked Rossgrove.

"Ah me!" cried the old borderman; "the lopin' hounds have caught our trail in the damp grass! Forward, friends, for the river; the crisis is comin'!"

With a silence that told of deep inward fears, the fugitives quickened their footsteps into a run. Not three hundred yards behind the foe could be heard.

To add to the fears of the fugitives they saw that the fog around them was growing lighter, and that a current of air was lifting it gradually upward from the plain.

"I am afraid it's all up with us, Hurricane," said Harry Dudley; "the fog is rising from the plain, and—"

"Never say die, Harry, with that little angel at your side," replied Hurricane. "Let us trust to the God of battles for help. It's not my own scalp that I prize so dearly—I wouldn't run a thousand miles to save it—but these gentle ones is what's stirrin' me up."

"Ah, uncle Hurricane!" cried Dora, "you have risked every thing for us, and—"

"Ah! the fog is goin'!"

A current of air sucked across the plain at this juncture, rolling the fog up into the heavens, revealing the plain for miles and miles.

A glance backward showed the savages in wild pursuit. Before them, not over eighty rods away, rolled the Des Moines river.

"There it is—the river—right there!" cried Ransom Kendall.

"We will never reach it," cried Captain Rossgrove; "the savages will overhaul us before—"

He did not complete the sentence; a sudden boom burst upon the air, and at the same instant a cannon ball came screaming through the heavy air and plowed its way through the ranks of the pursuing redskins.

"Saved! saved! thank God!" cried Rossgrove, coming to a sudden halt.

"Yes, Let's take it cool, now, as a mountain top," added Old Hurricane; "the boys with the boat

are at the appointed place, and it's well they sent a little assistance hereaways, for the devils were pressing us hard. But they'll give us no further trouble—see, they've stopped and are huntin' up the pieces of their friends that cannon ball scattered over the plain. A good shot war that, and, sweet Moses! hear the boys on the boat a-yellin' for glory."

The little band moved on. The river was reached. Then the boat was swung in toward the shore, and a plank was shoved out, the fugitives taken aboard, and the next moment all were homeward drifting.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE DEMON.

"THANK God, we are out of the land of outlaws and savages—away from the scenes of Scarlet Death and his victims!"

Thus spoke Captain Rossgrove in a spirit of joy, as the boat resumed its downward course on the morning following the day of their embarkation for home.

During the first day Indians had been seen skulking along the shore, and our friends anticipated some trouble, but they were happily disappointed and permitted to pass undisturbed beyond the enemies' country.

Two men were kept constantly at the sweeps, being relieved every hour, and in this manner the boat was urged forward with considerable speed. However, it was a trip of considerable inactivity to friends, to be thus hampered and confined upon the boat. It is true many hours were spent in recounting their adventures in locating claims, and in listening to Old Hurricane and Noisy Nat "spin their yarns." And the daring adventures of the Dumb Spy in Spain, proved the most thrilling of all the stories, told in Wild Dick's most jocular vein.

"There is one thing," said Harry Dudley, during a lull in the general entertainments of story-telling and singing, "that I would have given a great deal to have had solved before we left Defiance, and that is the mystery connected with the Demon of the Des Moines."

"And here, too, Harry," responded Rossgrove; "there is something very singular about that avenger, and yet I can't help but think he is no more than a common human, possessed of a little more than common ability in some things."

"Boys," said Noisy Nat, "you are all mistaken, for I see'd the Demon that night the Injuns got into the fort. I see'd it just as plain as wink. I see'd its horns and cloven feet, and I see'd balls o' fire float outen its mouth, so I did."

"I think, Nat, you saw all that after the Indian struck you down."

"No, no," persisted Nat, "I'll swar I see'd it before. It's no use talkin', boys, I see'd it!"

"Time'll solve the mystery properly," said Old Hurricane, as if anxious to dismiss the subject.

"Yes," replied Rossgrove; "perhaps we will hear more of Scarlet Death when we go back to settle our hard-earned claims, purchased with the lives of two of our comrades."

"Wal, you can't say, boys," said Wild Dick, "but that Scarlet Death has favored you some."

"True, Dick; he has favored us on more than one occasion, and that is what makes me all the more desirous of knowing who or what the Demon is," said Rossgrove. "But, not changing the subject, boys, I opine the best days of Reckless Ralph and his cut-throats are about over. I shall court the favor of the law just for the privilege of leading a party of dragoons to the extermination of a good portion of the Dispute. Moreover, the information we possess will put an end to river-piracy above St. Louis, at least."

"Hello, there! a settlement!" suddenly shouted one of the men.

All eyes were turned shoreward, and as the boat rounded an abrupt bend in the river, they saw a number of log cabins grouped together on the bluffs overlooking the stream.

"That's an old tradin' post, boys," said Old Hurricane. "I stayed there a week once, and I found them a purty reasonable set of fellers."

As they drew near the post, they saw three men come down the bluff and stop on the beach near where a small canoe was moored. One of them carried a traveling-bag.

They would glance toward our friends' craft, then at one another as though conversing about it. At length the man with the traveling-bag stepped into the canoe before them, and taking up the paddle, headed directly toward the flat-boat.

As he approached it was seen that he was dressed in a citizen's suit of black, and that he was a man of years, as his long, white hair and beard indicated.

The stranger hailed our friends and asked the permission of a moment's talk. It was granted, and he asked:

"May I inquire how far you are going down the river?"

"To the Mississippi, by this conveyance," replied Rossgrove.

"Are you loaded so that you would not take another passenger—myself?"

"If you desire to take passage with us, you can do so, although our accommodations are not of the best."

"Thank you," said the old man, kindly, and turning, he waved an adieu to those watching him on the shore, then ran alongside of the raft, and was assisted aboard of it.

"This is a decided streak of good-luck, falling in with you, gentlemen," said the old man, with apparent joy. "I live in Illinois, and have been on a visit to my son, who is living at yonder trading-post. I was just starting home, and but for this streak of luck, getting in with you, I would have had to make the trip alone in a canoe. And now, if there is any-

thing I can do toward assisting along, let it be known, gentlemen."

"We have plenty of hands to run the boat, Mr.—Mr."

"Henry Farnsworth," said the stranger.

"Farnsworth?" repeated Rossgrove. "Well, Mr. Farnsworth, try and make yourself perfectly at ease. We are all trying to enjoy ourselves the best we can after a fortnight of dangers and trouble."

"A pleasure-party, I would judge from the presence of those bright faces yonder," said Farnsworth, waving his hand toward the females, who were leaning over the side of the boat, gazing down into the water, and laughing and chatting merrily.

"We have been out on the Black-Hawk Reserve, staking out claims," said Rossgrove, "and by a combination of events, those ladies were thrown into our company."

"I was not aware of the whites being allowed to pre-empt land on the Black-Hawk Reserve, at least, not until after next May."

"We were fortunate enough to get a permit of Black-Hawk himself to select and stake out our claims, to be entered when the Indians' title expires, but it cost us a deal of fighting and trouble."

"I see you are prepared for fighting," said Mr. Farnsworth, with a significant glance at the howitzer.

"We captured that from our enemies," said Rossgrove.

"Indeed?" said the old man; "have the aborigines become so far advanced in civilized warfare as to possess cannon?"

"No; we took that from a nest of outlaws."

At this juncture Camilla joined her husband, who introduced her to the new passenger; as he did also a number of his companions.

The old gentleman now mingled with the party in general, though he had but little to say, being of a still, retiring disposition. The captain noticed, however, that he was a very close observer, examining everything about the boat very minutely. And when Wild Dick was addressed, in a jocular manner, as the Dumb Spy, it was observed that the stranger manifested more than ordinary curiosity; and at times his eyes were seen to be fixed, first upon Wild Dick, then upon his mute brother, Witless Seth, with a strange expression. To still add to the curiosity of the captain, he noticed that the eyes of Witless Seth followed the form of the stranger almost constantly, when his—the stranger's—face was turned.

However, he thought this might all come of nothing more than simple curiosity, and thought but little about it until Old Hurricane came up, and, plucking him aside, said:

"Captain, have you noticed how that ole gentleman watches Wild Dick and Witless Seth, and how the latter dogs the steps of the stranger 'bout the boat?"

"I have remarked to myself about the fact, and came to the conclusion that if there was anything more than simple curiosity about it, some of the rest would notice it also."

At this juncture Harry Dudley approached and said:

"Boys, have you noticed any peculiarities about Witless Seth since that old gentleman came aboard of our boat?"

"We were just speaking of it," replied Rossgrove; "but here comes Noisy Nat; let's see what he has to offer."

"Talkin' privacy, boys?" asked the hunter, coming up. "Well, then, I'm o' the opinion that's sumthin' goin' to happen aboard o' this boat. I never see'd a human bein' look so much like a tiger as that Witless Seth does sometimes, when that stranger's back is turned. Why, his eyes turn green and his fingers clutch and twitch like claws—see! look at him now!"

All turned, and were not a little surprised by what they saw. Henry Farnsworth stood leaning on the gunwale of the boat, gazing shoreward, in a kind of mental abstraction. Behind him, and a little to one side, stood the mute, Witless Seth, his eyes fixed upon the old man with a fearful gaze. His form was crouched like that of a tiger, one foot being placed in advance of the other, as preparing to spring upon Farnsworth.

"By the gods of Olympus!" exclaimed Old Hurricane, "he's goin' for the ole stranger—there, look!"

They saw a round ball drop from the sleeve of the mute into his hand, then he drew back his arm and threw the ball with all his power at the head of the stranger.

A cry rent the air, and Henry Farnsworth staggered and fell heavily to the deck, a death-groan pealing from his lips.

"My God, the mute has murdered him!" cried Captain Rossgrove, springing to the fallen man's side.

But, Witless Seth was there before him, and, stooping, he tore a mass of false whiskers and hair from the face and head of the fallen man, and those who had known him gazed upon the face of Reckless Ralph, the outlaw captain!

The villain was just breathing his last, and a sudden cry of surprise burst from the claim-stakers' lips when Wild Dick turned the head of the outlaw, revealing to them the death-mark of Scarlet Death.

"By heaven!" cried Rossgrove, "the mystery is explained! Witless Seth, the mute, is Scarlet Death, the Demon of the Des Moines!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CURTAIN FALLS.

For several minutes great consternation prevailed aboard the boat. The discoveries of Farnsworth being the outlaw chief, and Witless Seth, the mute, being the terrible Scarlet Death, had shocked the party with surprise and astonishment. But all final-

ly became quieted down, and the boat moved on as usual.

Whatever the intentions of the disguised outlaw had been—and there was not a doubt but that they were the destruction of the party—they had been thwarted in due time and justice meted out to the villain.

Witless Seth no longer endeavored to keep his character as Scarlet Death a mystery or secret, for, with the death of Reckless Ralph, the oath of vengeance that made him an avenger was fulfilled. He at once made an exhibition of his deadly weapon and the manner of using it so silently.

His weapon consisted of nothing more than a solid, leaden ball, about an inch in diameter. This was securely attached to a strong cord connected with a wire coiled loosely around his arm, and kept concealed from view by his large, flowing shirt-sleeve, which was never confined at the wrist.

When he threw the ball the cord and coiled wire expanded fully a rod and a half, by holding the arm in an extended position after the ball left his hand. When the ball had expended its force, the elasticity of the cord and spring of the wire would cause it to rebound instantly almost to the hand of the thrower, who could gather it up and conceal it within its receptacle in an instant.

It was a very simple contrivance, yet it had required a year of daily practice to become perfect in its use—unnerving in aim and deadly in force. He had chosen the temple as being the most vital part of the person not protected by garments, and the strength and precision which he had acquired by constant practice made his aim sure and deadly. In fact, he never attempted the life of an enemy unless he was sure of his victim.

The mystery of the cloven hoofs was also explained away by the mute. On the bottom of his feet he wore a pair of wooden sandals, cut in the form of a slender hoof. Over these he wore his moccasins, and, when it became necessary to keep up the mystery of the Demon by hoof-prints, he had only to remove his moccasins.

This whole mystery seemed very simple to our friends now; but the question at once arose, why had he assumed the character of an avenger? Was it a mere thirst for human lives, or was there some dark secret back of it all?

Through Wild Dick—from whom they had learned the above—they now learned this sad story:

After parting with his brother, years before, Witless Seth wandered away and finally drifted into Spain. Here he met Reckless Ralph, who, he found, could speak the mute's language. This was some inducement for him to remain there, for he had found it very difficult in communicating with those that knew nothing of his language. It is true he had learned to write a little, but, upon the border, he found very few who possessed that accomplishment. Seth soon found out where Reckless Ralph had learned the sign language. The outlaw had a young and beautiful girl in his family that was deaf and dumb.

The mute at Spain had proved a very valuable help to Reckless Ralph as a spy. But, in the meantime, he had fallen in love with the mute girl. His affections were reciprocated, and the mute lovers spent many happy hours in each other's society. In fact, Spain was a Paradise to them.

Reckless Ralph saw what was up between them, and looked upon every moment spent by Seth in his sweetheart's society, as time lost to him, and to obtain the undivided attention of the mute spy, it soon became necessary to remove the girl where she could not be found.

She was sold to the Indians, and there slaved to death. Seth never saw her again, but learned what her fate had been through a robber who had taken such an interest in the mute as to learn the silent language.

When he had learned who were the outlaws instrumental in selling his sweetheart, Seth, in his intense madness, took a solemn oath to slay every one of the robbers, and every Indian he could get a chance at; and well had he fulfilled his vow of vengeance, and sustained his two characters—those of a friend, and yet an avenger to the same party.

And thus ended the mystery of Scarlet Death, although Nolsy Nat would not give up but that he had seen a demon with horns and cloven feet that memorable night at Fort Defiance.

And now we have little more to write. The claim-stakers reached their homes in safety. Little Dolly was adopted by John and Camilla Rossgrove, who took her to their home in Columbus. Dora returned to friends in Illinois, but she soon became the happy bride of Harry Dudley.

When they reached the Mississippi the hunters all parted with the claim-stakers with feelings of regret. Old Hurricane shed tears when he came to bid Dora and Dolly farewell, and after their departure, he stood upon the bank leaning upon his rifle, watching them recede from view down the broad Mississippi.

Wild Dick, his brother Seth and Nolsy Nat went away to the North-west, while Old Hurricane and Ransom Kendall returned to their old trapping-ground North of Spain.

The following year, after Black-Hawk's title to the reserve had expired, the young Kentuckians all removed with their families to the territory and took up the claims they had run so many dangers in selecting.

Through the instrumentality of Captain Rossgrove, Spain and the Dispute had been cleared of its outlaws, though for years afterward the air in and about the place was pregnant with evil.

Captain Rossgrove had been in the territory but a short time, when, who should call at his cabin but Ransom Kendall. Dolly was there to meet him, and

ever after that the young ranger was a frequent visitor at the captain's house, until Dolly became his wife. Then he gave up his nomadic life and became one of the settlers.

From Ransom, those whom we have known as claim-stakers, learned that Old Hurricane's true name was Wallace, and that he had removed his quarters to the far South-west where "times were more stirring."

Years after, Captain Rossgrove heard of the daring exploits of a great, bold-hearted hunter called Big-Foot Wallace, on the Texan Pampas, and he knew at once that he was the same brave and kind-hearted hunter he had known as Old Hurricane.

THE END.

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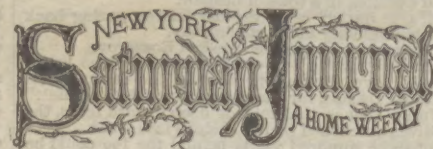
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